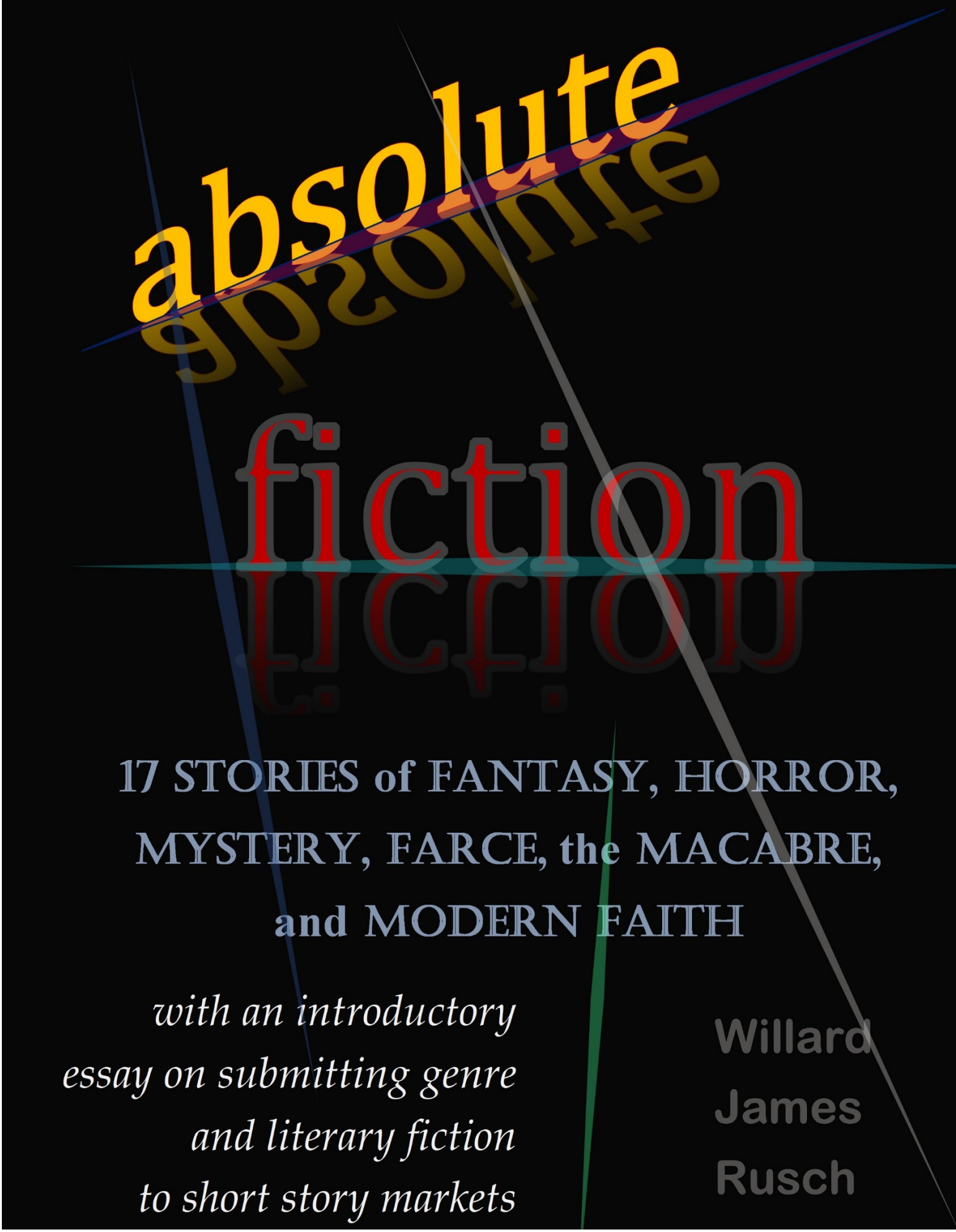
absolute
fiction
17 STORIES of FANTASY, HORROR, MYSTERY, FARCE, the MACABRE, and MODERN FAITH
with an introductory essay on submitting genre and literary fiction to short story markets
Willard James Rusch

Absolute Fiction:

17 Stories of Horror, Mystery, Farce, the Macabre, and Modern Faith.

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ISBN #: 978-1-4835757-0-4
Amazon Kindle ID: B01JSH918W

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For the memory of my mother,

Helen Ursula Sweeting Rusch

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Acknowledgements

Many friends, family members, and academic colleagues read parts of this collection as they were first being written. I owe deep thanks to all of them and to the staff at the John Hay Library of Brown University, especially those associated with the H. P. Lovecraft Collection.

Of my readers and supporters, special thanks go to the following: Helen Peppe, close friend and the first editor to publish one of my stories; Benjamin Rybeck, former student, friend, new novelist; and Margaret Božena Gosciło and Lisa Walker, scholars and theorists of rare insight. Well-established writer of fiction, memoir, and non-fiction Mary Lee Coe Fowler provided much more excellent advice than I had any right to expect.

Paramount among these people who were generous and helpful stands Lee Hope, writer, editor, founder of academic programs, and visionary. My many dialogues with her about teaching, publishing, and writing kept me from abandoning fiction altogether. I still possess the notes she wrote on many rough, probably awful, drafts of the stories in this collection.

List of the Stories

in Order of Their Composition

The Shrinking Middle Class (1989)

Della's Motivation (1991)

Girls' Stories (1991)

Fin de Siècle (1992)

From Lunenburg to Shelburne, N. S. (1993)

A Spike in the Head (1993)

All the Weeks of Easter (1994)

The Punishment for Felonies in Belize (1994)

And Marion Never Looked Lovelier (1994)

Expect Delays (1995)

A Morphology of Panic (1995)

Near the Windows (1995)

The Stillness Caused by Trains (1996)

Seven or Eight Versions of She (1997)

A Map for a Fictional World (1997)

An Octopus Vase (2011)

Only All the Dead (2014)

Introduction

A Short Memoir: Genre and Mainstream Fiction; Submission, Rejection, Acceptance

The story that appears first in this collection also was written first. Finished in October 1989, it was submitted continually until September 1994 and published in winter 1995. At that time, I already had published one scholarly book, a linguistic study of the vocalic phonology in the East Mercian Old English dialect, which, according to received scholarship, most directly preceded the Middle English Southeast Midlands dialect, which, in turn, most provided the basis for Modern Standard English. That book helped me earn tenure at a state university that, at the time, was positioned to become the only comprehensive metropolitan university in the state. The school's mission, despite faithful, serious work by a crowd of very intelligent people, most of them highly underpaid, never was sealed. Beginning in 2014, quite the opposite occurred when the school began terminating staff and faculty by the dozen, closing programs and departments, and coercing senior, tenured professors to retire. I was already retired then, against my desires. In retrospect, I can see that I was a test case for the administration, that the thankless shove it gave me out the door provided it with information it could use two years later. Perhaps the administration learned more than I will ever know, because the terminations and associated cutbacks that began in 2014 (with an initial *fête de guillotine* that drew national attention), all weathered the predictable flurry of litigation and grievances. A year after that assault, some departments actually were forced to decide between supporting the administration's attempts to rid the school of senior faculty and never again searching (for the foreseeable future) for a single new tenure-track faculty member.

In 1989, though, as I worked on "The Shrinking Middle Class," I was cruising on a well-considered career trajectory. The propulsion for writing for publication was defined by (1) continuing Old and Middle English language study and (2) exploring the opportunity to write fiction in a genre that had appealed to me from the time of my earliest memory, horror and fantasy. During and before graduate school, I had invested much time and energy in writing what I hoped would be regarded as serious literature, work that would stand up against that of the best dead authors from western civilization. I doubted I would be the next Hawthorne or Austen or Flaubert, but I imagined high horizons. That was before writing scads of scholarly essays (of the studenty type) for my course work, a Ph.D. dissertation, new scads of papers for scholarly conferences, after landing a tenure-track position, and the published study of Standard English. After the cumulative effect of that intellectual work settled, the bright lights of writing good fiction dwindled to specks. But I knew that I could not stop writing fiction, so I devised a new plan. If I had

accomplished a Ph.D., earned a job, and secured tenure, I reasoned, forging a reputation in genre fiction should fall well within my skill sets. I could research the horror and fantasy genre markets, read a thousand or so stories published there, and establish myself with dispatch as a category writer who counted, a writer courted by editors and agents, even screenwriters and producers.

To cut my teeth, I wrote a novel belonging to a market narrower than a *niche*, "Lovecraftiana," fiction that continues and expands the "mythology" or "mythos" created in stories and short novels written by one Howard Phillips Lovecraft, the sorriest, closetedest son of a bitch ever exploited by the vicious editorial practices of the very early pulp markets, principally the original avatar of *Weird Tales*. Taken as a whole, Lovecraft's work is comparable to *The X-Files* in one key respect. Much of his fiction contributes nothing to his "Cthulhu" mythos; some stories contain tangential material related to the mythology; and still fewer works are entirely concerned with the overarching or meta narrative telling of how human life was created by extraterrestrial scientists visiting (for sinister purposes) planet Earth. Many of Lovecraft's fellow contributors to *Weird Tales*—Robert Bloch (author of *Psycho*) and Robert E. Howard (creator of the iconic Conan the Barbarian), for example—eventually flourished beyond (or to the farthest limits of) their respective dark genres. Among Bloch's earliest writings, in fact, lie the foundations of Lovecraftiana. But Lovecraft always already failed from his earliest days, dying prematurely as diseased and alone as a tubercular bohemian in a roach-infested garret. For many winter months, then, I toggled between *rongorongo*, a novel that concludes in the Antarctic city discovered by explorers in Lovecraft's At *the Mountains of Madness*, the home base for the creatures who created humankind, and a white-knuckled, Derridean, grammatological analysis of allegedly incorrect rhymes in Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry. For Chaucer's bad rhymes, I spent long hours at a library table covered with notes and lists written on graph paper and reference works in English, French, and German; for Lovecraft's aliens, I hunched over a computer already primitive when my employer assigned it to me, alone in the dark in my cheap apartment, making something out of nothing—truly creating—while trying to be faithful to Lovecraft's fiction legacy.

Unfortunately, my naïveté about legacies seduced me into imitating, very guardedly, Lovecraft's idiom, his stylized language. Even a short sentence taken almost at random from his prose affords a good window on his "overwritten" style. This one comes from "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," one of his most famous tales: "Eternities seemed to elapse, and the nauseous fishy odour of my environment seemed to mount suddenly and spectacularly." Many people, especially regular readers of certain genres, will find nothing objectionable in this sentence. More power to them. By modern literary tastes, however, it sends up at least five or six flares: zero action verbs, two adverbs (of the "-ly" type), two infinitive verbs ("to mount" and "to elapse"), and a strong presence of Latin-derived words ("eternities," "spectacularly," "nauseous"). "Fishy" is the sole word delivering an Anglo-Saxon monosyllabic punch, but even that effect probably is weakened by the following "odour," in the British form always favored by Lovecraft, rather than native English "smell," "stench," or "stink." But I had learned a thing or two from my research into writing and selling horror fiction. I exercised restraint with adjectives, adverbs, polysyllabic words, yeasty nominalizations, repetitive evocations of mood, and other Lovecraftian weaknesses. Still, a friend who read *rongorongo's* climax, in which

Lovecraft's giant cone-shaped aliens emerge from hidden passages, called it an "adjective explosion." As I worked on *rongorongo*, though, I believed that my prose was cleaner and meaner by a wide enough margin to make it cognate with Lovecraft's but to spare it the disfavor accorded Lovecraft by both his contemporaries and later critics. I never thought my contribution to Lovecraftiana might meet a worse fate than Lovecraft's *Mountains*. After being rejected by literary agents and genre mags (which all despise serializations, unless the author already is famous), my novel disappeared somewhere along its electronic path through new computers and updated platforms. Lovecraft's novel, after being rejected with no comments by *Weird Tales*, the fanzine that Lovecraft had helped bring to prominence, was published by *Astounding Stories,* a lesser mag but one that published serialized pieces. The printed version, to Lovecraft's dismay, was so butchered by an editor that long sections make no sense. For a price laughable even by the standards of his day, his crowning work was an atrocity. (Having read the entire novel in its original published form at Brown University's John Hay Library, I can support Lovecraft's assessment with some authority.) This was not Lovecraft's final publication during his lifetime, but, even though his biographers and friends' memoirs don't say this, the debacle broke him utterly.

Even before "Shrinking" was finished (and the article on Chaucer's rhymes), my resolve to remain in a category was undergoing change. By good chance, I became friends with an established writer who taught creative writing courses as an instructor at my school. For a long time, she read and critiqued my writing with unflagging generosity. Not only was (and is) she a gifted writer herself, she also knew the business of writing more thoroughly, from a perspective tinged with Marxist philosophy, than anyone I knew then or now. Every lunch meeting we shared to discuss my work (and sometimes hers), left me smarter, less impoverished of momentum by my increasing wealth of rejections, and more conflicted about my aversion to attempting any fiction that fell completely outside my selected genre. My mentor's excellent fiction can fairly be called minimalist, I believe, even though that label, today, often is not taken kindly. In my writing, she slashed her share of adjectives, adverbs, and other structural features usually viewed askance by minimalist writers. Beyond such mechanical editing, however, she also spoke of setting up oblique psychological tracks between characters, of expressing states of mind through diverting attention to inanimate surroundings. But I recall vividly that she once said, almost in passing, "I enjoy reading your stuff because it has plots." That comment, delivered with such innocence, gave me an idea almost banal but with staying power. I began thinking more directly and clearly about creating plots without all the words that had become my average. Total word count per story, of course, is not what I mean. That seemed secondary. It was words per sentence, per independent clause, per dependent clause, per noun phrase.

Through this friend's advice and her position, I reluctantly began participating in various writerly public functions, including my first public readings at local gatherings. One year, she asked me to run a workshop in a summer writers conference that had a long history, some prestige, and always a thin cash flow. She recently had taken command of the conference, upgrading it in all respects and ultimately saving it from economic failure. The year before she asked me for a workshop, the conference had been incorporated into a "restricted residence" (originally called "low-residency") M.F.A. program.

Today, this method for delivering instruction has proliferated beyond everyone's expectations, even those of the most opportunistic administrators who galloped abreast with the horses dragging education into "distance learning" for everything from certificates in pressure washing to doctorates in genetic engineering. The democratizing appeal of distance education, however, was far from jaded when my former workplace approved my friend and colleague's proposal for the restricted residence writing degree It would give students the opportunity to earn an advanced degree in writing (fiction, poetry, drama, creative non-fiction) without being tied to a particular location for the length of a traditional semester. Instead, students would work with faculty remotely—at that time, primarily through hardcopy snail mail. The curriculum also required students and faculty to congregate, on-site, for one or two short periods each year, usually during the summer or the break between the university's fall and spring semesters.

As the conference approached, my misgivings about talking to the students became more serious and varied. One misgiving amounted to performance anxiety. My workshop would constitute one three-hour meeting of a course taught by a major contemporary writer. I had never met the writer or the students. The second reason for self-doubt was that the conference, now operating with some serious money, featured highly prominent writers with national reputations; for the first time, editors of major publishing houses would give plenary addresses. Publishers of top-flight small literary magazines and desperately-sought literary agents would form the texture of cocktail parties, dinners, and late-night confabs. Third, my colleague had asked me to speak about making blind submissions to markets of different types—and about how to grow from prolific rejection. She knew I had applied to my non-career Mae West's advice that a girl should keep a diary because someday it can keep her. My detailed record of rejections, studded with witticisms, profanities, and whining, accounted for the terminus of 97% or so of my submissions, so she rightly assumed that I had materials on which to draw. I doubt she knew, though, that I didn't see my wealth of rejection as contributing to any kind of personal growth—unless sheer doggedness is growth. But I masked my disappointment with the topic. I prepared a lengthy visual aide that was both amusing and informative; I wrote remarks for the session's opening, middle, and end; I even calculated such figures as average reading times at magazines of different types, percentage of submissions that died because magazines folded or changed formats, and how much time it took to rush each new piece into the mail.

The students were enthusiastic and appreciative. They asked intelligent questions and I responded with an alacrity not always achieved in my teacher persona. They actually seemed grateful for receiving a hardcopy pack of significant rejection letters and excerpts from my journal, as if they were being given free headstarts. Interactive learning at its best—except, perhaps, that the class's genuine instructor, the well-published writer, seemed increasingly disengaged, almost lost, as the hours passed. I tried to draw her into the productive exchanges, unsuccessfully at first; but she livened up near the end, made insightful connections between her experiences and mine, and expressed sincere appreciation for the efforts I had put into the workshop, *gratis*. Nevertheless, her interval of self-exclusion cast a shadow over my sense of fulfillment until the day ended and I could concentrate. It was not a matter of

condescension or elitism, I realized; not a matter of doubting the educational value of what she watched. Rather, the heavy machinery of submission and rejection itself was less known to her than that of suspension bridges was to me. It wasn't that she lived in enviable oblivion concerning such genres as horror and fantasy and romance; it was that she had never come into such close contact with someone who wrote in those trenches. In retrospect, I felt the way H. P. Lovecraft might have felt if he had found himself at a roundtable with modernists like T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf, people whose professional lives, writing styles, and critical approbation profoundly lacked common ground with his own desperate career. A few chance incidents that occurred at later conference events enhanced my H. P.-otherness. In one, a highly- lauded editor of a top publishing house mentioned that his company, through someone's poor decision, had "lost" the writer for whose class I spoke. The comment made me think, with skulking envy, of legendary associations between agents and writers and of how distant from that world I would always remain. At a mixer on another day, I overheard someone say that all but one of the chapters in the writer's most recent novel had first hit print as stories. When I bought a copy of the novel, I discovered not only that this was true, but that every mag that had published a chapter belonged to the highest echelon of the small press world. After the summer ended and I read the novel, which I found excellent (within well-defined parameters), I was struck by having seen at such close quarters what I unfairly branded "the painless method of writing a novel."

From that point forward, my goals in writing changed every time I started a new story. Becoming an established genre writer now seemed even more impossible than becoming an artistic success had seemed back in the days of *rongorongo* and "The Shrinking Middle Class." I continued to value plot but used fewer words to create one. I placed a couple stories at genuine literary mags but also a couple with genre zines. Without being aware of what I was doing, I zigzagged through genre fiction, modified minimalism, and even the type of narrative that recently has been called "hysterical" and "encyclopedic" realism. My fiction output, which had no impact on my status with my employer, sneered at the best advice ever given me for racking up sufficient scholarly publications to earn promotion to ("full") professor: "Identify what you do best, then do it over and over again." So I continued linguistic studies that drew on (and demanded) my graduate school background, but in fiction I freestyled, telling myself that writing endlessly in one mode is gutless. Slowly, though, my fiction work tapered off in quantity while my time spent on academic projects and innovative teaching increased. Entries in my fiction submission/rejection journal became infrequent until a day arrived when not a single story was under submission, not to *High Plains Literary Review*, not to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, not to junky fanzines with lurid names I don't recall.

Not too long after that, the job problems began that the first paragraph of this essay mentions. Sensing a coming storm, I was compelled to put fiction aside altogether. During my years as a tenured associate professor, I had quipped a few times that I wondered how many lives, after graduate school and four, five, or six years as an assistant professor, had been ruined by *not* being refused tenure. The question might be Wildesque, but I learned quickly that having one's research projects, professorial identity, intellectual stimulation—one's entire life, in short—ripped away by coldblooded bureaucrats and a couple treacherous colleagues came close to being lethal. When I was capable

again of mustering interest in anything, however, I found time on my hands and I conceived the idea that culminated in this fiction collection. Liberated from the urgency of learning Native American languages for a course on endangered languages, stripped of the need to bone up on Jewish Christianity for a course on the antique Roman Catholic church, peeled away from keeping current on deconstruction, cultural studies, and pedagogy, I could review all the fiction I had written, published and unpublished, to make decisions about what to keep and what to purge from my computer and files. Not long after that, I left my home state and city for the last time, into an uncertain future. As I drove away, I felt, in H. G. Wells's words, "a vast implacable condemnation." But I took with me a new starting point in fiction.

When I first got started, my method was simple: pick the best apples in the barrel, polish them up, and send them to market. As I proceeded, though, I realized that the stories presented an unusual opportunity. I could make public a body of work representing a writer's passages through key fiction categories read by large audiences and different modes favored by serious critics. For several years, overlapping almost exactly with the period that began with my forced retirement and continuing to the present, vigorous debates have developed concerning (1) the respectability (or lack of it) accorded genre writing by higher education, the publishing industry, and the general reading public and (2) the decline in critical support experienced by minimalism, which derives from the styles developed by Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, and Chuck Palahniuk, and the proportional ascent of fiction sometimes called "maximalism": "big novels," those with ties to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, novels that are lengthy, heavily plotted, unafraid of digressing on specialized fields of knowledge. In regard to (1), you need spend only a few hours on the internet to gain a good sense of how category writers are agitating against academia's entrenched ways of teaching creative writing and the literary establishment's attitudes toward genre works. Respected and expensive M. F. A. programs, which all owe their existence to the academy's embrace, decades ago, of minimalist fiction and poetry, are being rejected by writers who want the programs to take genres and marketing seriously. These dissidents know well that, despite the rise of "maximalist" fiction and despite the published descriptions of writing programs that make them sound welcoming to writers of all types, that minimalism remains the coin of the realm. Participating in the protest from a different angle, a world-famous science fiction writer recently disparaged, quite bitterly, the exclusion of genre works from the lists of novels nominated for major awards. Protests of this type have occurred before, but they have exerted no cumulative effect. Regarding (2), the type of non-minimalist fiction represented by Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, and Zadie Smith currently draws more attention and controversy (and probably awards) than any other type, especially in the wake of Wallace's suicide and the widely-acclaimed film based on reporter David Lipsky's interviews with Wallace. The polarism between minimalist and maximalist fiction was strengthened in 2000 by literary critic James Wood, who expressed his exasperation with novels that become curio cabinets for knowledge of obscure subjects, that deploy a broad cast of characters on erratic and elliptical plot trajectories, that flaunt defiantly improbable circumstances and events, that even contain (like Wallace's *Infinite Jest*) hundreds of footnotes. But Wallace's name, of course, along with those of others currently writing encyclopedic

fiction, is not nearly as widely known as those of mega-sellers like Stephen King, Danielle Steel, and Nicholas Sparks. (Pynchon may be known more widely for his animated guest appearances on *The Simpsons*, wearing a paper bag over his head, than for his most brilliant fiction.) This adds fuel to the genre writers' campaigns for fair treatment, as does the long-known fact that major publishing houses amass their profits far more from genre work than from literature that wins literary awards.

Against this background, then, appears this fiction collection. When I first dedicated my energy and time to this enterprise, I knew that the final product would be something of an oddity. Seeing writers cross from genre to literary fiction or vice-versa may hardly be precedent-setting, just as seeing genre pieces with literary overlays and the reverse is not new. Among the genres, mysteries and thrillers like those of James M. Cain (*Mildred Pierce, Double Indemnity*) have an affinity with minimalism, while novels and stories belonging to the mainstream frequently lay claim to genre markets. Works by Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, and Gore Vidal especially come to mind. This collection, however, provides a broader, yet more compact canvas for viewing modulations, changes, transgressions than any single collection I can recall. Moreover, *Absolute Fiction*, without any intention on my part, constitutes a teachable text, one from which emerging writers, those going it alone and those pursing academic degrees, can profit. All of the stories herein probably will appeal to very few readers. Those who find "Expect Delays," "A Spike in the Head," and "Della's Motivation" agreeable to their genre palates may well find "The Stillness Caused By Trains," "An Octopus Vase," and "A Map for a Fictional World" too constrained or controlled or cloaked. But another way of looking at such a compilation is that a healthy majority of readers, beyond finding experiencing several pieces that interest or provoke them or that earn grudging respect, will find something that helps them grow as writers or readers.

Brief Notes on the Stories

Rejection Histories, Previous Publications, Genres and Plots

"The Shrinking Middle Class." Written a month or so after the economy convulsed in 1989, the story follows two men, strangers to each other, who both are cash poor. Larry, an assistant professor at a university in Maine, and Jason ("Starch"), a homeless hustler, discover a common connection on a day when a blizzard paralyzes Portland. Both men confront a third stranger, the city's notorious "Dog Man," who walks the streets with a pack of unfriendly dogs. Today, when the economy still (or again) suffers, the story's title frequently is heard on the news. It was rejected by eight pulp magazines, accepted by one that later disappeared, then accepted again for the first issue of a start-up literary review published in Maine, *wordplay* 1.1 (winter 1995), 10-20.

"Expect Delays." Never published, "Delays" was started two years after the disaster at David Koresh's Branch Davidian separatist religious compound. A classic rejection came from George H. Scithers, editor of *Weird Tales* and fantasy entrepreneur. The story is seriously "time-limited," he said, as though the Waco catastrophe were not seared forever on the public psyche. Betty, a broadcast journalist, covers a similar stand-off caused by Phillip Lorica, a charismatic leader whom Betty interviews in person. Since puberty, Betty has received occasional visions of future tragic events, which becomes vital after she begins to resist her network's coverage of the event. "Delays" racked up thirty-one rejections and two acceptances that ultimately fizzled. The rejection history includes both (low- and high-) level genre mags (e.g. *Shadows* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*) and solid literary publications (e.g. *The Tamaqua Literary Review,* where it worked its way, according to the rejection letter, to "the final round of jurying"). The general enthusiasm level for the story was strong and equally distributed among the different types of publications. The strongest disadvantage with editors was the story's length. *Spout Press* (still "serving the weird community since 1989") provisionally accepted the story (from a pool of over 200) and actually changed the forthcoming issue's layout in different ways, trying to wedge in the bulky muscle of "Delays"—but to no avail.

"Girls' Stories." One for the irony books: this story went to only two markets, both prestigious genre mags, before being picked up by *Fusion: The Anthology of the Undiscovered*, a new annual publication. It paid! $360.00 USD! It sent a copy of the illustration (full-page) made for the story! The check cleared! The publication and editor disappeared without a trace! At least, he never

responded again to queries, even though he edited a genre zine, *Magic Realism*, through the nineties. In the story, Dan and Ann, visitors to Prince Edward Island, become enmeshed in plots both paranormal and human. The House of Green Gables (from *Anne of Green Gables*) and its powerful attraction to Japanese tourists make the locus for the mysteries.

"A Spike in the Head." Submitted for the first time in October 1993, when this story received its final rejection in March 1995 it had dug a grave twenty-three rejections deep. It finally appeared in *wordplay* 1.3 (fall 1995), 9-20, which had already published "The Shrinking Middle Class." Nearly all the markets that rejected the story were upper- and mid-level mainstream markets that described themselves (in the usual reference works) as being open to considering category stories. A rejection note that should do any writer proud came from *Primavera*, a historically significant feminist literary mag founded by students at the University of Chicago. Co-editor Ruth Young wrote "I'm sorry we've kept your manuscript so long. Our policy is to publish by unanimous vote only, and when your story came up for discussion there were some negatives. Since others were strongly positive, they agreed to re-read 'A Spike in the Head.' While we did not vote for publication we wanted you to know that we think that the 'spooky family memory' pregnancy evokes in Paula is fascinating. We're certain this will get published. Think of us again when you're submitting stories. Good luck." The story's point of view character, a magazine feature writer visiting her grandmother in upstate New York, discovers—despite her grandmother's opposition—murder, illegal abortion, and unexpected acts of compassion in her own family's history

"Della's Motivation." The rejection history for this story is short, only five mags, but it did not end with an acceptance. Sheer word count, like that of two or three other works in the collection, virtually doomed it from creation. Two reigning horror editors disliked it intensely, while a third, Kristine Kathryn Rusch at *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, complimented it highly, but found the alligators "too much" for her. Rusch may be right, but she apparently did not see the story as a farce, textured with the paranormal, adventure, and feminism. Della is an erstwhile, self-deprecatory junior corporate executive competing with others of her type through several physical challenges at a behavioral motivation facility in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. As the trials become increasingly dangerous, Della becomes convinced that not all of the campers will leave the facility alive, but her own ambition to succeed in business drives her to the conclusion.

"Fin de Siècle." One rejection for this story probably resonates through the pre- (and non-) publication histories for this entire collection. After listing many strong points for the piece, the note says "It's just not genre—there's no stretching it." "Fin" first went into the world in February 1992, when the American reaction to the identification and spread of HIV/AIDS was still mutable and volatile. It tells of a gay man's relationship with a homophobic "shock jock" who bears a deep secret. Interspersed with this narrative are scenes describing playlets in which AIDS victims enact their fantasies before committing suicide. The story, another long one, was rejected by eleven

markets —mostly genre zines, but also some mainstream places—before being accepted, five years later, for a new annual, *A Theater of Blood*, in March 1997. The editor, C. Darren Butler, a major figure in horror and fantasy, praised the story in his acceptance letter, but another issue of *Theater* never appeared (and never another letter from Butler).

"Only All the Dead." The only piece submitted to a competition, "Only" was written in 2009 over two short work sessions for National Public Radio's "Three-Minute Fiction" contest, which seems to have been discontinued. The shortest piece in this collection, it also probably is the only one with a classic "twist ending." The first story in this collection with special appeal, perhaps, to Roman Catholics.

"Near the Windows." Altogether, this story certainly received more extremely positive responses than any other story in the collection, even though it finally was published by a literary "little mag" with a very modest circulation, *Timber Creek Review* 10.1 (spring 1999), 3-19. Not a genre work, despite two bloody deaths, the story's narrator recalls her flirting with a younger man while vacationing in Belize without her husband and the husband's long-postponed violent reaction to her behavior. *Oasis*, *Story*, *High Plains Literary Review*, and *Missouri Review* are only four of the thirty-four rich markets that rejected "Windows." An annual student publication in Maine, *Words & Images* (2001), 32-39, reprinted the piece.

"A Morphology of Panic." In Ireland's Connemara region, a loner who suffers from anxiety attacks bikes from Galway to Sligo (with a stop on the Aran Islands), then back to the west coast, where he takes a ferry to Inishbofin. Twice before he hikes to Cromwell's fort on Inishbofin, he has chance encounters with a stranger, Mark, who is backpacking through Ireland. At the fort, the two men meet again, leading the loner, possibly, to understand something about his behavioral problem. "Morphology" was accepted by *Compass Rose*, a biennial publication, 3 (2001), 24-29, just short of two full years after it had been rejected by thirty-one mainstream mags. One of these was *Kaleidoscope: International Magazine of Literature, Fine Arts, and Disability*, where everyone on the board wanted to publish the piece—except for the person with the final word. That rejection smarted—not because *Kaleidoscope* paid for its fiction, but because it has a wide audience.

"From Lunenburg to Shelburne, N. S." This piece may belong more to creative non-fiction than narrative fiction, but the key scene, in which the protagonist, another bicyclist, is verbally abused by pointlessly hostile onlookers, veers away from exposition. "Lunenburg" was published in *Words of Wisdom* 15.4 (spring 1996), 32-41. When *Words* accepted the story, the mag seemed like a poor substitute for the sixteen prestigious markets that had rejected the piece (e.g. *The Antigonish Review*, *Amherst Review*, *Grain)*, but now that perspective seems elitist. *Words* and its sibling, *Timber Creek Review*, have published much fine fiction.

"A Map for a Fictional World." Another piece that might be called creative non-fiction, it follows an unnamed night runner through his routine 3.5 miles

around Portland, Maine's Back Cove. His run is punctuated by his own reflections on the dangers of night running, while the narrative is interrupted with (someone's) reflections on an ancient Hellenistic epic, the *Argonautica* (or *Jason and the Golden Fleece*). The threads intertwine, perhaps, in the conclusion. "Map" received only six rejections, all from literary magazines of the highest quality, before being retired.

"The Punishment for Felonies in Belize." Published in *The Massachusetts Review* XXXVIII.ii (summer 1996), 241-62 (which nominated it for a Pushcart Prize), after earning a paltry eleven rejections (all from the usual suspects in classy literary magazines), "Felonies," despite edging toward minimalism, contains a strong plot. In Belize, two young professionals with a long history of platonic friendship and shared travels, learn more about each other. But genuine deepening occurs after the vacation, when the woman comes to the wake of her friend's brother's unexpected death.

"And Marion Never Looked Lovelier." The titles of a few of the twenty-four journals that rejected this farce reveal the type of market for which it was written: *Semiotext(e)*, *Mobius: A Journal of Social Change*, *Postmodern Culture*, *The New Yorker*. When it was accepted by a less toney market, *Timber Creek Review*, a submission thought to be dead requickened: *Studies in Contemporary Satire*, an "occasional" publication loosely affiliated with the University of Nebraska, Kearney, accepted the piece. Unfortunately, *Studies in Contemporary Satire* changed from being occasional to being dead, sending "Marion" into a long hiatus. Raucous, mean-spirited, millennial, "Marion" features an elderly tycoon who produces, it seems, a new film starring dead actors dating back to the Silent Era. The rejection note from *Puck: The Unofficial Journal of the Irrepressible* gives a good idea of the story's effects on a receptive audience: "Thanks for sending 'And Marion.' This story shows a great ear, a knack for composition, and a biting wit. I really enjoyed reading it."

"All the Weeks of Easter." Selected from over a thousand blind submissions by *The William & Mary Review* 33 (1995), 38-53 and reprinted in *wordplay* 2.2 (spring/summer 1996), 9-16, "Weeks" is the only story in the collection with origins in a specific contemporary event, the abduction of a young woman in Oswego County, New York, in a small town near the south shore of Lake Ontario. The tragedy still haunts the area, where a suspect eventually was arrested and tried. The story studies the social rituals that the abduction fosters in a heavily Catholic community more than it dramatizes an abduction and rescue search.

"Seven or Eight Versions of She." Laurence Goldstein, noble as one can get in the world of academic journals that publish original poetry and fiction, wrote the following in a full-page letter rejecting this story from inclusion in a special edition of *Michigan Quarterly*: "*She* is a favorite novel and film of mine . . . so I'm sympathetic to your project here. It reminds me a bit of [Theodore] Roszak's novel *Flicker* [1991] in its hip adaptation of the quest motif. But I found the story wildly uneven. . . . It could have been a possibility for our film issue . . . but I'd rather see something else of yours

for the future." Hard to tell if rejection letters like this keep more emerging writers working hard or fighting suicidal fantasies, but the story was revised and improved on the basis of Goldstein's remarks. Unpublished until now, except in a student-operated review, *Words and Images* (2009), 51-67.

"An Octopus Vase." Finished at 6:58 PM, Wednesday, 20 April 2011, a full thirteen minutes before it was read aloud and edited on the fly (to thunderous applause and a partial standing ovation, in place of the hisses and jeers that not only were anticipated but entirely possible, given the nature of the audience), "Vase" is one of only two "short-shorts" in the collection. Despite the highly marketable length, the minimalist texture, and the live audience's approval, the story was rejected with no comments by the four or five high-end places that considered it. It presents two sisters, both devout Roman Catholics, dealing with the church's unexpected reaction to their brother's possible suicide. The older sister has an unusual preoccupation with an obscure Catholic tenet.

"The Stillness Caused by Trains." Glimmer Train receives over 40,000 submissions a year, so a rejection note that says "Please send us more of your work" might be framed by some writers. The fourteen other similar markets that rejected the piece said nothing negative or positive. A minimalist piece, "Stillness" provides local color of upstate New York (as do two other pieces in the collection) in its story of a young man visiting his deceased grandparents' rural home after an estrangement caused by his family's propensity for stifling emotional reactions to life's misfortunes. The location is inspired by a house that still stands, still shaken by trains, where I now reside.

Absolute Fiction

17 Stories of Fantasy,
Horror, Mystery, Farce,
the Macabre and Modern Faith

The Shrinking Middle Class

Temperatures today not expected to exceed twenty degrees. Snow, possibly severe, predicted for the later afternoon. *Finish preparing Aeneid by nine.* Offshore visibility reduced to ten feet due to sea smoke. *How many quizzes left to grade for the intro course? Ten?* Repeating top story: Another homeless person has been reported missing by friends, bringing the total to three in as many weeks. Police department spokeswoman denies that the reports are not being investigated.

With the last words from the newscaster, Larry lifted his head, groping through the sparse predawn light for the radio. Half-awake, he tuned to the classical station that he used to ease himself into the lifeless winter mornings. 5:38 AM and he was already late. He had been up grading and preparing until after midnight, but still he would need to scramble if he wanted to face Intermediate Latin with a reasonable degree of confidence. "Intro to the Classical World" at 11:15 would be a walkthrough, except that those damn quizzes still weren't finished.

And prepare for the Personnel Committee meeting, his memory prompted him. *And you have a conference with that pushy senior from the Medieval Studies Seminar.* Groaning, he kicked back the pile of afghans and sheets, swung his legs down to the hardwood floor—*Damn! How cold is it?*—and headed for the bathroom.

"Wake up, Polycarp," he said over his shoulder, peeling off a flannel nightshirt. "Fat, worthless cat. Do something useful for a change. Comfort me before this miserable day begins."

Burrowed into a warm hollow in the sheets, a fat money cat stirred the tip of its tail, slitted one eye open, closed it again.

Shaving in the shower, Larry managed to force some optimism for the forthcoming day. Three classes, hours of grading and preparing, a snotty student, and the committee meeting, during which someone would certainly inquire about the status of his book studying the influence of Jewish Christianity on the formation of the New Testament. What was this to get down about? To give himself another minute in the tiny bathroom's warm steam, he went over his lower jaw a second time, against the grain. *Maybe today's the day to get the class started on Virgil's use of dactylic hexameter* he was musing, when a shriek like a police siren pierced the cloudy vapors. Simultaneously, he nicked his throat.

"Shit! Ouch! Polycarp, what the hell?"

He charged from the bathroom and in four strides was across the living room. Coming up to the large bay window, he was struck by a blast of frigid air. Whatever the weather, he always left one window open for the cat to sit in, a bad habit he frequently vowed to break.

She shrieked again when he put his hand on her back, then growled deeply.

"What's rattled your cage?" he asked. The hair on Polycarp's tail stood on end, fully fluffed, making it look like a sawed-off broom handle that had sprouted wires. Impatiently, she glanced at Larry, then down at the street again. Larry lifted the window shade higher and peered at the street below, rubbing away frost and condensation with his hand. Two floors below, a lone dog was ambling about, sniffing at the ground, pawing at street litter. An unidentifiable mixture of breeds, bony and rangy, a dirty, reddish-brown coat that made Larry feel a small, instinctive shiver of revulsion.

Suddenly another dog trotted quietly into sight, followed at short intervals by two others. One of them began howling—a cartoonish 'aarrrooooo'—and, within a few more seconds, a pack of dogs had gathered below Larry's window. Rusty water, they roiled about the street and sidewalk, some of them concentrating their snuffling on the dumpster that sat at the comer of the building.

"This can only be The Dog Man," Larry said under his breath.

Polycarp's eyes darted wildly from one dog to another. Far back in her throat, she resumed her rich growling.

"This is another good reason not to let you go outside, pal."

He had first heard about The Dog Man early the previous year, his first at Central Maine University. The after-dinner chatter at a faculty party had turned to Portland's plummeting property values, which had led to an earnest discussion of America's shrinking middle class. Probably trying to lighten the mood, Larry's host had brought up the subject of Portland's numerous population of eccentric homeless people.

"Watch out for the one who pushes a shopping cart filled with metal shards," advised a Portuguese specialist. "He prefers to hurl them off the bridge that crosses the interstate at Franklin Street, but sometimes he lets the odd one fly at a pedestrian."

Other street celebrities had been thumbnailed with humorous anecdotes: Maisie (AKA The Quilt Woman), The Dumpster-Sleeper, and, with the highest profile, The Dog Man.

"An interesting case," the host had reflected, draining a glass of wine and leaning back in a scarred leather chair with several cigarette burns. "He's educated. Actually went to Choate f or a year or so—before anyone called it Choate Rosemary—but graduated from a public school. Did some instructor stints at a local private school for a while, then got involved in politics. He's not truly a homeless person at all. Last year, he was a candidate for a minor municipal office, so he must have a legal residence somewhere. But he roams the streets all day and night, always surrounded by a swarm of malodorous dogs. Sometimes he has just a few with him, but at others as many as twenty. People complain about him constantly, but the police keep saying he's not actually violating any laws. Funny thing is that no one seems to have seen him for quite a spell."

Scanning the dogs' activities on the street below him, Larry assumed that The Dog Man had made his glorious return to Portland. *But where is the old wreck himself?* he wondered. *Vente! Si cannibus vagus venit non longe canum potest esse?* He smiled at his own facility. *Wonder if any of my tenure inquisitors can riff on Keats in Latin like that?*

As though on cue, a dark figure came into sight, slogging slowly down the middle of the street through the night's accumulation of powdery snow. Dawn was just breaking behind him, spilling garish red and orange across the grey sheets of Casco Bay.

A dark green army coat hung from his frame in greasy folds, reaching nearly to the top of his high rubber boots. Tails of several grimy scarves dangled to his knees. A black knitted watch cap was pulled tightly over his head, covering the ears and concealing all but a square patch of his face. Larry caught a confused image of sunken, rheumy eyes above a sparse growth of dirty beard that was identical in color to the dogs' fur. The man walked with his hands tucked into the coat's drooping folds. As he drew close, the dogs began gathering around him, their tails flapping with excitement and black eyes gleaming. A yelping, barking racket pierced the deep winter silence. Surrounded, The Dog Man continued to shuffle forward, paying no heed to the pool of furry motion around him.

Larry was struck by the erectness of the man's posture. Something about it belied the image of his filthy clothes and the mud-crusted Adidas gym bag that hung from one shoulder. He guessed at The Dog Man's goal: the dumpster that stood between the sidewalk and the comer of his three-story brick building. Sure enough, Dog Man plodded steadily toward the corner. He kicked away a few dogs, then jerked up one of the four square lids and leaned his head low over the contents.

"Come on, cat," Larry said firmly, lifting Polycarp from the window sill. "I don't want to watch this poor guy digging through that trash for his breakfast. And one of us has work to do." But as he began to turn away, Larry emitted a startled cry. The Dog Man had found something of interest in the dumpster, but not the remains of a pizza or the dregs of a bottle of beer. At the end of his outstretched arm hung a cat, a skinny, black and white stray that Larry had seen many times around the dumpster. By the scruff of its neck, Dog Man lifted it high above his head, regarding it with no apparent expression. The barks of his mangy attendants became maddened, a feverish chorus of throaty howls. At the center of their jumping tumult, their master pivoted slowly, tantalizing them with the vision of the helpless cat. The skinny body hung as limp as a dishrag, its eyes pulled shut by the man's cruel grip on its neck.

"Hey!" Larry shouted. "Cut that out!" He dropped Polycarp and began rapping on the window pane. If he heard anything above his dogs' barking, The Dog Man did not so much as look up. Larry hesitated, then turned and raced across the room. He tore open the door and galloped down the three flights of stairs four steps at a time. The colder air of the stairway reminded him that he had only a bath towel tied around his waist, but before he could rethink his impulsive action, he was jerking the front door open and stumbling onto the small, raised square of concrete that served as a porch.

"Let that cat alone!" he shouted, sliding to a stop and dancing from one bare foot to another in the snow.

But he was too late. Even as he finished his words, The Dog Man pitched the cat high into the air. Horrified, Larry watched it spinning end over end, the black and white patches swirling together in a confusing blur against the brightening sky. For a moment, it poised almost motionless at the top of its arc, its green eyes flashing like agate marbles. Then it was falling headlong, diving into the twisting, churning knot of waiting canines. Several sets of jaws clamped onto its sprawling limbs just as it emitted a single, ringing peal of pain.

Larry doubled over and slumped against the house, gulping in great draughts of the ice cold air. He wanted nothing more than to retreat into his apartment and crawl back into bed, to try to forget this day entirely. But he also wanted to strangle The Dog Man, actually kill him and watch him die.

"Larry?" said a raspy voice close behind him.

He whirled around to find The Dog Man directly in front of him, standing several yards away from the grisly mass of dogs. The man's face, what showed of it, was impassive. Reminded suddenly of what it had been like, as a little boy, to burn in impotent fury as a bully teased him, Larry struggled to form intelligible words, to keep his voice from cracking.

"Sir, I will tell the police about this," he managed at last, grinding the words through his teeth. They sounded thick and laboriously enunciated. He bit his lip and spoke again: "This is against the law."

"Dogs gotta eat, Larry," said the man slowly. "It's a hard old world. You oughta know that."

And then he began to laugh, squinting his eyes shut and revealing pinkish lids crisscrossed with fine, purple veins that Larry could almost see throbbing. But it was his teeth that seized Larry's attention. The man's lips curled back as he laughed, exposing long, yellowed incisors that flashed dully in the growing morning light between his raucous guffaws. Shivering down the length of his body, Larry jerked opened the door to his building, slammed it shut behind him, and leaned against a wall, dazed. Had he really seen those grotesque teeth, or was it some bizarre trick caused by the light and the spectacle of feasting dogs? Now that the scene was over, he was overwhelmed by a sudden sense of isolation, vulnerability. He was alone, as The Dog Man had put it, in a hard old world. Oblivious to his own shivering, he began trudging slowly up the stairs, dully wondering how he would ever be prepared for the day's business. Only then, in mid-step, did it occur to him that The Dog Man had called him by his first name.

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Twenty minutes later Larry was driving away from his neighborhood in Munjoy Hill, heading for his usual breakfast diner in downtown Portland. As he threaded his way through the narrow, car-lined streets, he reflected that Munjoy Hill was an appropriate place for Dog Man's return. Street people frequently drifted into the neighborhood. Many times they had approached him for money, identifying him with their uncanny instincts as one of the yuppies who coexisted in uneasy proximity with the genuine, traditional inhabitants of Munjoy Hill, Portland's lower working class. Driving slowly on a light coat of ice, Larry passed dilapidated frame houses interspersed with rejuvenated buildings that had been converted to apartment houses. His own building belonged to the latter type, directly across the street from one of the slummiest

houses in the neighborhood. An absurdly extended family lived there, ebbing and swelling by the day between six and fifteen or so residents. They specialized in making noise at late hours.

But his apartment had a view of Casco Bay and was close to the university, factors that almost counterbalanced the noisy neighbors and the ubiquitous images of class struggle that lowered his spirits every day. All through graduate school, Larry had maintained an indifference to money, but now it seemed as though he thought of little else. Fearing poverty, he developed a contempt for those who seemed trapped by it. To himself, recently, he had even referred to his neighbors as 'white trash,' a habit that filled him with sullen guilt.

He sighed as he turned onto the Eastern Promenade and began to pick up speed. On his left, the bay was spread blue, gloriously shining in the first full tide of morning sun. Despite his urgency, he slowed down. "It almost compensates for being so bloody broke," he muttered to himself With nine days left before payday, he had less than ten dollars in his wallet, about five in his checking account, and almost nothing to eat in the fridge. It was the same story every month. Frugal as he was, desperate poverty always closed in near the end of the month. Between rent and payments on his car and educational loans, his monthly disposable income was a joke. The previous month he had lived on rice and crackers for four days and had run his car within a drop of empty before writing a bad check at the supermarket one day before payday. During graduate school, he had somehow confronted such crises with snappy good spirits. Everyone he knew lived in the same straits. But that period of fecklessness was gone forever. Now the prospect of eking out an existence on a few pennies a day sent panic filaments spreading through his gut.

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Across the street from the diner where Larry sat drinking coffee and grading quizzes on Cicero's use of the ablative absolute, Jason Andrews —'Starch' to his current acquaintances—was being dragged into consciousness, fighting against the wakefulness that would bring cold and hunger. He was curled up at the center of a triangle of garbage cans that propped up a slipshod tent of cardboard and newspaper. The previous night, frigid gusts snaked down the alley that he had found himself in just as he drained a half-pint of Black Label. Still, it wasn't a bad place to flop. He had been carrying a stack of newspapers under his coat and in one of the cans he had found a woman's long wool skirt. With these defenses and a few cardboard boxes thrown at the end of the alley, he managed a relatively warm nesting place for the night. For a few minutes, he spraddled about in his pile of paper and rags. Twinges and aches in every part of his body made movement slow and painful and he was so dehydrated that his mouth would barely open. His tongue felt like a baked pine cone.

"Gotta see if the shelter's still servin', Starch," he wheezed to himself. With an enormous heave, his head crashed through the tent, a nightmare jack-in-the-box. After urinating, he lurched from the alley and headed for the Church of the Sacred Heart. If it were not yet 8:30, he could get a breakfast in the church basement. Right now he only wanted water, but if he missed breakfast he would be on his own for food until evening, when a soup kitchen opened on

the other end of the city. He crossed the street toward the diner and scooped some snow from a parked car. The ice particles hurt his cracked lips, but they eased the prickling thirst. As he let the snow trickle down his raw throat, a man exiting the diner stopped for a moment and stared at him for several seconds.

"Got some change, sir?" Starch called out automatically. "Spare some change?" The man turned on his heels and hurriedly walked away.

"Ah, fuck you," Starch called out after him. "Ya walk like a faggot." Bending over slightly, he loudly trumpeted some gas. Feeling somewhat better in the stomach, he began the long walk to breakfast. Professional people were beginning to fill the streets when he arrived at the church. He sidled along close to the walls of store fronts, enjoying how the suits altered their insistent beelines to avoid him.

"I useta have a job," he snarled at a pair of women walking toward him. In perfect unison, they sidestepped five feet to their left and resumed forward motion, never dropping a syllable in their conversation.

His remark made him remember that only a few weeks ago he would have been at work now, feeling energetic and rested, feeling young. Before his girlfriend had left him and his drinking had become its own fulltime job, he worked steadily for a company in Freeport that bought fresh fish from boats in several harbors around southern Maine. He loved the job. Travel, plenty of fresh sea air, talking with fishermen over cups of coffee. He always smelled like fish, but now he missed even that. But the money had been minimal, and when his personal life started to fall apart, he discovered that he had no resources to get through a bad stretch. The transition from a cheap but respectable apartment in Freeport into the streets of Portland had been swift and fairly painless, thanks to the booze. But when he sobered up from a four-day binge, he realized with a jolt that he was homeless, penniless, and hungry. One night, an older man who looked rich struck up a conversation with him, took him home, jollied him along through a bottle of scotch, and then performed various sexual acts with Starch's nearly unconscious body. In the morning, the old guy sent him off with eighty dollars. When Starch could think clearly again, he realized he had found a new career opportunity. He knew he still looked good: twenty-nine, muscular, lean. So he gladly went off with the next several men who made their interests known. But he never got eighty dollars again. Soon he was working for a ten-dollar bill and a bottle. Now, he hadn't turned a trick for over three weeks, and he didn't pretend to himself he would be attracting any more clients.

Reaching the church, he entered the basement through the back door and then hurried toward the food line. The tables were full, which always meant that the food was nearly gone.

"You're just in time, Mr. Andrews," said a short middle-aged woman behind a steam table. "We've barely enough left for three more servings."

Starch muttered a hello. He liked Dorothy, but he felt embarrassed when addressed by his real name.

"This is it, I'm afraid," said Dorothy, handing him a plate. Starch looked at a small piece of croissant, a bowl of oatmeal, and one thin strip of bacon.

"But there's extra orange juice today if you want it," she added brightly. Then she lowered her voice. "And here. Don't tell the others. I'd go broke." She slipped three aspirins onto the corner of his tray.

Starch found a table with an empty place and began to eat mechanically, still feeling no hunger. No one at the table spoke to him, although he knew most of their faces. After two months on the streets of Portland, he still hung back from the fellowship of his peers. Half of them were clearly psycho and the others were something worse. Still, breakfast at the church usually made him feel a little less alone. Some of the people there had histories much like his.

Today the talk was all about Jerome, who had been a regular at breakfast for over a year. Three days ago he hadn't shown up; after that, no one had seen him in his usual spots. Jerome had been a real insider, with lots of friends who were sober with some consistency. Yesterday, two of them had declared him missing to the police.

"We marched in there, bold as brass, and said 'Look, we got rights to police protection, same as anyone else. Jerome wouldn't've took off without tellin' nobody. Somethin' got him.'"

It was Laney talking, the shelter's political leader. A poet, she said she was.

"Ah, they made us fill out some fuckin' forms," she continued in response to a question. "But they di'n't take us serious. Not even 'cause of the two others what disappeared last week. Assholes is what they are."

The others at the table began talking excitedly. The cops knew who did it but didn't care. All three who had disappeared were drunks. It was a government plot to clean up the streets. The cops would do nothing before a body was found.

"Fools!" An old woman's voice broke through the chatter. She thrust her upper body between the rows of heads lining the picnic table. "Fools! Don't you bums know who's stoled 'em?" She was wearing a man's leather cap with woolen ear flaps pulled down. Her hair hung beneath it in thick black hanks shot with white. She was one of the all-out nuts. When the weather was good, she camped at downtown intersections and ranted on every subject from the collapse of communism to malpractice insurance.

"They all came up missin' after the dogs come back, di'n't they? They all took up with *him*, di'n't they? I saw all o' em with 'im. He got 'em for their sins! Cut them up for his dogs 'cause they wouldn't worship him! I saw it!" She spread her arms widely, slapping the faces of those nearest her.

"It's in the Bible! 'And if the people of Ahab die in the city, the dogs of the street shall eat them; if in the field, the vultures of the sky.'" She glared at them all, daring them to fault her memory for biblical parallel structures, then she stomped away, leaving silence behind her.

Starch groaned and rose from the table. Crazies like her made his own situation seem more hopeless. He remembered the man at the diner at whom he had shouted earlier. Probably that guy thought he was as nuts as Julie. And there was something else. Julie's words had made him remember that last night's bottle had come from The Dog Man.

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A locomotive wind spiraling off Cape Cod propelled storm clouds over Portland. Boston had been hammered all afternoon; now Portland waited its turn. Enormous snowflakes scudded about the whitish twilight, an early warning of the coming storm. Monument Square burgeoned with pedestrians

hurrying to gather food, newspapers, and video tapes before settling in for a night of hard weather. The gulls swooped about in circles made lopsided by the gusting winds, their cries intensifying the gathering sense of urgency.

Larry paced in front of the public library, scanning the crowd for a woman he sometimes dated. Unexpectedly, she had offered him dinner that night. Dead tired, he wanted his comfortable chair and his cat more than anything else, but he had accepted. The lure of free food tipped the balance.

A crowd of street people was gathered around the library's large heating vents. Larry watched them silently as they walked about, some rubbing their hands before the grates. Two of them, a man and a woman, were sparring over a bottle of wine in a brown paper bag. The man grabbed for the bottle several times, but the woman kept jerking it away. Looking more closely, Larry realized it was the man who had begged from him that morning outside the diner. Preoccupied with spying, he barely felt a rustling around his feet. But when something pressed against the back of his legs he instinctively reached down, feeling cold fur. Suddenly, the area was filling with dogs, the same pack he had seen from his window early that morning. Before he could step out of the maelstrom, The Dog Man himself stood directly before him.

"Waiting for me, Larry? It's Larry Sliodmak, isn't it?"

Larry stood aghast for a moment before spluttering a reply. "Waiting? For you? *Larry?* How do you know my name?"

"Oh, I know several people on the faculty at Central Maine U. I taught there once myself, you know, part-time. I've heard about you and I've been hoping to meet you. My name is William. William Cannis." He spelled his last name, winked jovially, shoved his hand forward.

"I certainly wasn't waiting for you," Larry stated flatly. "Now excuse me." He turned and quickly crossed to the other side of the square, shaking. *Cannis*? he thought. Was that supposed to be a pun? Or was the man trying to tell him that he, like Larry, knew Latin?

As if I could possibly care about that, Larry thought, glancing back nervously to see if The Dog Man were following. But 'William Cannis' was already talking to the street person Larry had observed earlier. At one point, The Dog Man put his hand on the other man's shoulder as the homeless man shouted. Eventually, they began strolling toward the statue at the center of the square.

"Plenty more where that came from," The Dog Man was saying. "You come to my place tonight for some more. I can show you a very interesting way to beat the streets, Starchie."

The other man pawed at the ground with his foot and muttered something Larry could not hear, then they parted ways. The beggar, who looked strangely forlorn to Larry, stared about uncertainly for a few minutes, then shuffled away. The Dog Man strode across the square in the opposite direction, scattering pedestrians with his train of dancing attendants. Despite his repulsion, Larry noted the regal sweep with which The Dog Man parted the crowd.

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Just before midnight. Thick snow falling since dark. Streets drift-covered, empty. Only gusts of wind disturbed a weighty calm. Squalls spun through alleys and over hydrants. Down one such street, Starch plodded along, hugging closely to buildings where the snow was least deep. A comical, lumbering snow wreck, he soundlessly passed the quaint shop fronts and historic brownstones of the Old Port district. In a ripped pair of sneakers with no socks, his feet sodden. Earlier, he had wheedled the better part of a bottle of Ripple from a woman he knew, but now his need for a serious drink was like a trip hammer in his skull. Still he had not intended, not at first, to take up The Dog Man's offer. Julie's crazy rantings did not deter him, but the mangy dogs gave him the creeps. For that matter, so did The Dog Man. But he would get alcohol nowhere else tonight, so he struggled toward the waterfront. For a long time, he had seen absolutely no one, not even another street bum. They were all at shelters or in alleys behind garbage cans, safe and comfortable as charity or luck could make them.

"Shit, I'll freeze out here," he snarled.

The Dog Man's house was somewhere past the wharf where the island ferry docked, a part of the city that Starch barely knew. He slipped down an alley that ended at Commercial Street, a broad thoroughfare edging the ocean along Portland's south side. On the far side of the street from Starch ran a set of abandoned railroad tracks. Beyond that lay the ocean, densely lined at this point with docks, fish markets, and boarded-up tourist businesses. In the furious snow, the Commercial Street was a snow field, a moonscape.

Starch plowed across to the railroad tracks, intending to follow them to the ferry wharf and from there to hope for luck to find the house. The tracks were covered by snow, but he found them with his feet, which sent him sprawling onto the snow. "Fuck!" he screamed. But the snow only howled back at him.

From where he knelt in the snow, he could just glimpse the lighted windows of the city's most expensive townhouses. He thought of the people behind those lights, people watching TV or just gazing at their expensive views of the storm's fury while log fires burned. The image made him sob, but he choked it off with a curse, rose to his feet, turned left, and continued his long walk to a drink.

Nearly an hour later, he reached the long pier leading to the Casco Bay Ferry terminus. Here he began scanning the ocean side of the street, searching closely for The Dog Man's house. It was just a hut, he knew, somewhere close to the water. After passing the dock, he waded into the drift that lined the road and peered down a slope toward the water. Finally, he sighted a dim light in a hollow at the bottom of the ravine. Desperately believing this must be his destination, he fumbled his way down the embankment, wading and falling through the drifted snow toward the promise of a dry room and decent booze.

Away from the street, the darkness was complete. But his fuzzy senses focused on a deserted quonset hut set into the slope. One side of it extended nearly to a high wall holding back the sea. A dog's long, plaintive howl echoed through the night.

"At last," he said aloud and pushed at the door.

"Come in, come in," a booming voice called from inside. "It's hell out there."

Starch stepped into the hut and immediately was bathed in a rich heat. The air was filled with smoke pluming from a fire in a potbelly stove standing in the room's center. The mantle of snow on Starch's head and shoulders melted in a single wet rush. Drops that fell close to the stove sizzled on the blackened brick floor. The sudden heat took away his breath and the snow melting past his eyes filtered his vision through a wavering sheen. Starch's only thought was to jerk off his soggy, filthy clothing, to be steamed clean again in this unexpected bath of hot vapor.

"Boy, you sure are a sight!" the voice spoke again. "Get comfortable, Starch. Take off all that heavy junk."

Starch peered toward the source of the voice, but the room was lit only by the fire in the stove, which faced him. Behind it, the room was steeped in shadow. "You got a drink for me?" His voice sounded thick and toneless in the stifling heat.

"Sure do. All you want. Get out of those clothes. I'll turn on a light."

Starch slowly began to work his way through several layers of clothing. On the far side of the room, a match flared and was touched to a tall, fat candle that stood on a table. A flame began to gutter weakly. In the wan light, Starch saw The Dog Man lying on a mattress thrown on the floor. Several obscure shapes moved around him. Dogs were in the bed, several of them.

Stripped down to his jeans and a T-shirt, Starch stepped closer to the mattress. "So where is it?" he asked. "Fuck, man, I climbed Mt. Washington to get here. Let's have it." He advanced to the very edge of the mattress and looked around, hoping to see a bottle.

"Take 'em all off, Starchie. Get real comfortable."

In a convulsion that rippled from his temples down to his heels, Starch jumped back from the bed. Stretched at full length, The Dog Man lay fully naked except for a ragged blanket that trailed across his lower legs. Dogs were snuggled closely against him, one on either side and several at his feet. Above the mass of languidly writhing bodies, tiny specks flitted and jumped in a dense cloud. One dog bared its teeth at him while another dropped its head on The Dog Man's chest and lazily licked at it.

"My boys won't hurt you, Starch. They like anyone I like."

"Holy shit," Starch stuttered. "Holy shit." Suddenly his need for a drink had evaporated. He had suspected The Dog Man might demand sex in exchange for the booze, but he hadn't anticipated anything like this. He wanted to bolt from the squalid room into the snow, but his legs refused to move. Struggling against the sudden torpor, he forced his head to turn away from the tableau on the bed. Blinking away drops of sweat, when he could see again, he discovered that three large dogs silently had come up behind him. In massive certitude they sat before the door, staring at him evenly. Then they curled back their upper lips. The fire's flames flecked their yellow incisors; miniature scarlet tongues of flickered in their black eyes.

Starch tried to regain control. He wanted to scream at The Dog Man, to shout at him to go to hell with his damn dogs. But the gelatin in his legs was turning into a cold liquid. Squinting against the shimmering heat, he slowly turned again to face the bed. Despite his fear, he was overcome by a desire to fall down, forget this hellish place, dream about his old life.

The Dog Man had pulled himself into a sitting position, the dogs rearranging themselves around him. One large beast now lay with his head in

its master's lap. For the first time, Starch realized that The Dog Man hardly had the body of a longtime homeless man. His skin fairly glowed with ruddy good health. Beneath a massive chest, his gut was hard and flat. His arms were muscular, thrown back and widely open, covered with gleaming sweat. The blanket had fallen away, and Starch scanned down the man's legs, mesmerized. The limbs were powerful, heavy with smooth muscles. But what was that at his feet? Starch blinked, for one moment feeling a calming surge before total terror took hold. The feet—they couldn't be *his* feet. They were huge, too hairy, they were—

"You'll love it here, Starch. And you'll finally get over that little drinking problem."

The voice liquefied in Starch's reeling senses. Words and meanings swam in separate currents. The Dog Man rose from his filthy sheathing, his mouth stretching open in a hungry leer as he watched the dogs leap to their feet and rush at the man. They gathered about his feet, a growling throng that buffeted him to and fro. The largest dogs rose on their hind legs and brought their front paws down upon the shaking man's chest. Expertly they nipped at buttons and belts and straps until his clothing dropped in heaps and the man stood whitely naked in their midst. His shoulders fell, his head hung forward. A strangled, half-human cry escaped his lips. His knees bent, and the dogs covered him.

❖❖❖

Just before 2:00 AM, Larry was kicking his way through the fresh snow, leaving the Old Port and heading home. Dinner with Elizabeth had led to a nightcap at her apartment, which should have led to a pleasant session of lovemaking. It seemed likely the university would be closed the next day, so Larry had anticipated a leisurely good time. But his hopes were frustrated by a hot, sudden argument concerning commitment. Larry had explained that he needed time to build a strong financial foundation before considering himself coupled with anyone in a meaningful sense. Elizabeth had told him to have a meaningful walk home in the blizzard.

What the hell, Larry thought. *The ol' Carper is better than sex, anyway.* The snowstorm's wild, Spartan beauty appealed to him, making him feel more content than he had all day, but he disliked the neighborhood he was in. He had opted for a shortcut when he left Elizabeth's, not thinking that it would take him through the seedier section of the lower waterfront. Rounding a corner, a white shape darted across his path. For a moment, Larry crazily thought of polar bears. Then he realized it was a pure white dog. It capered about as though in a frenzy, springing into the air, schussing down drifts on its belly, rearing up on its back legs and pawing at snowflakes. Until suddenly it froze. From a clean white face, obsidian eyes spoke to Larry a jumble of violent emotions. Exultation, relief, pity. Then the dog averted its gaze, fixing its vision on some object off to its left. In its black eyes, something new reflected: terror. Larry realized the animal was staring at something behind him. With a knot of fear slowly unwinding in the pit of his stomach, Larry turned.

Some twenty feet away stood The Dog Man, a dullish blotch against the deep blue backdrop. He spoke in tones playful, but deep with finality.

"Come back, Amulum." he soothed. "Come on back, now, son. You'll learn how to behave right."

‘*Amulum?*’ Larry thought. *Is that Latin? Doesn’t that mean something like . . . ‘powdered grain—’?*

Then the man looked at Larry. All marks of age and decrepitude were gone from his face, as though burned away by the fierce light that shone from inside him. His soiled cap was gone, and a mass of dark red hair flew in the wind, whipped into a crown of writhing horns. He raised an arm and pointed at Larry, extending a finger tipped with a long, crooked nail.

“Esto hominem novum, Larry! Be the new man!” he screamed into the wind.

Feeling drained of energy, powerless to dispel a sensation of sinking into a yawning abyss, Larry turned again to face the dog, perhaps hoping for some sort of help. A tearing gust of wind struck his eyes. Uncertainly, the dog looked from one man to another. Larry raised a hand to wipe away the tears blinding his vision. The dog tensed its muscles. Larry watched in dread. The dog sprung for him.

Expect Delays

—One—

On the seventeenth day of the impasse—'the siege,' as everyone now called it—Betty's station manager had sent in an RV for the news team to use as a base. Watching the monster ease through a maze of tents and porta-potties, Betty's spirits lifted for the first time since the crisis began. No more driving into town for a shower and a decent nap. No more days of searing heat without an air conditioner in sight. But as the RV parked, it seemed like a symbol of her fate: a metal cage for a trapped prisoner. Three days earlier, her executive producer had told her that she would remain at the compound until the siege ended—or until the viewers lost interest. Other reporters from her station would be rotated in and out, but the top execs had decided to keep one reporter on location from start to finish.

"It's important for continuity," Fred had told her. "You were on-site the day of the firefight. The networks all picked up our footage, so you're identified with the story. Roll with it, Betty. Stardom awaits."

Firefight. Fred never stopped talking in broadcast jargon. Sitting on a slatted peach crate, a cellular phone clamped to one ear, she searched for an argument. "What about my documentary on the gas explosion in the sewers, Fred? It's still scheduled to air in a few days, isn't it?"

"Haw!" His good-old-boy guffaw. "You think that can't wait a month or two, Bet? Gotta go now, ace."

"Wait!" She swung her foot at an empty tin can, thinking fast. "This assignment creeps me out, Freddy." She tried to strike a plaintive, needy tone. "I've been sick to my stomach the whole time, I can't sleep, and I . . ." Could she tell Freddy anything so personal? "Maybe . . . maybe those people are putting a hex on me," she continued, wondering if she was serious.

"Haw! Put it on the air!" Fred shouted. "I bet none of the network hotshots would report something like that!" Then, suddenly earnest: "Have you checked with other reporters for similar symptoms?"

She stood up, kicked the crate over. "Look, Fred, I truly do not feel well out here. The sunstroke I got here the first day still—"

"No, you look, Betty. You're the only reporter who covered the shoot-out *and* you interviewed Phillip Lorica less than a month before this craziness started *and* the FBI says that he might select a reporter to come inside the compound. He'll probably choose the biggest name who happens to be there

that day, the damn publicity-hound, but maybe he'll remember you. So go and enjoy your RV and get some rest. And pray that Lorica hasn't stockpiled enough food to last for years. Oh, make sure you look better the next time you broadcast, okay? The windblown hair works for the camera, but no more jeans and T-shirts, okay?"

Years, Betty thought, standing at the edge of the media encampment, staring across the open desert at the high fence in the distance. Phillip's people had trucked in the logs from Utah, had built the wall themselves. Then they filled every chink and slit with a mortar they mixed inside the compound. Now no one knew what went on behind the black-faced walls. Only one structure was visible above the walls, an abandoned water tower that had belonged to the Gila Bend Indian Reservation. At night, using a telescope, Betty sometimes saw light inside the tank. Shining beneath the conical roof through a single window, it spilled in pallid sheets across the flat roofs of surrounding buildings.

Every day, she and the other reporters spent long hours observing the wordless barrier. *What are we waiting for?* she asked herself. *A surrender? More shooting? A conflagration?* She winced at the last thought, remembering the fiery disaster that had ended a similar standoff between a religious group and the government. *If this really goes on for years, will I still be here? Me and this hobo jungle that already smells like sewage? And the sixty-odd anti-government fanatics behind that damn wall?* She walked over to the RV and pulled the door open with both hands, fighting the hot desert wind. For once, she found herself alone. She locked the door, then shed her sandals, jeans, and halter top, relishing the cooled air. Enough time for some solitude before she had to dress for the next update.

She looked around at the detritus from the most recent poker game. All her co-workers were men, all of them slobs. She knew they would let the rubbish accumulate indefinitely. *Maybe for years*, she reflected, laughing bitterly. Her need for order told her to clean up the mess, but suddenly she was nauseous and weak. Even though she had done nothing since the morning broadcast except search the net for more background on Lorica and his followers, she collapsed onto a bench in the kitchen nook. Her vacant gaze fell on a calendar taped to the wall. Maybe the wait is over, she thought, counting the days since her last cycle began. *There's no reason to think a sight will come*, she thought. Still, dread would not leave her.

She had glimpsed the future for the first time when she was fourteen. Like her first period, which had started only days before, the sight arrived with no warning, unwanted. Driving home with her parents from a basketball game, thinking about the decades of menstruation lying ahead, she dozed off in the back seat. When she opened her eyes, lifted her head and stared into the empty gap between the bucket seats, she found that the windshield had disappeared. In its place, a swirling thick liquid of dark red, green, and purple. Her first thought was of the spin-art paintings she made each year at the state fair. Then, more alert, she guessed that the strange lights came from emergency vehicles at some accident scene around the curve. She tried to speak, to warn her parents, but her jaw was frozen. When she tried to shake her mother's shoulder, she felt the cold spread through all her joints and muscles. *A seizure*, she thought. She hoped her mother would turn and see her paralyzed. Then the colors on the windshield had parted and a long narrow aperture with tapered ends began to open, bulging at the middle. Shades of dark red lined the inner

sides. From beyond, bright, yellow light shone into her eyes. Her eyes locked open, she stared as a black speck floated toward her, gaining outline and definition as it moved, bathed the yellow glow. When Betty finally screamed, the colors flew away as suddenly as soapsuds hit by a bucket of clear water. She remembered her mother trying to hold her still, then the car slamming to a stop, her father's face twisted around, shouting.

Describing it later to her mother, she couldn't decide if she had seen her teacher's body floating in the water through the brilliant rent in the shifting mass of colors or if she had closed her eyes and seen it inside her head. But Mr. Trannier's image was vivid and stark, the harsh light licking even the thick spray of hair across his shoulder blades into visibility. Heavy and white, he floated face down in water, his arms spread and his hands bobbing lightly near his head.

Three more visions lay scattered through the years, each one framed by a bulging scar in a pool of dark, murky color, each one preceding a new monthly by a few days. Flying home from college one Christmas, she raised the shade on her window and saw the suited figure of a young candidate in a special election for a state senate seat. He was the heavy favorite with students at her school, and Betty was working for his campaign. Miniaturized in the airplane's concave window, he was standing on a platform before a bank of microphones, the area behind him grey with shadows. Shouting something with a wide smile on his lips, he raised one arm high in the air, his fist clenched. Then the arm fell, the smile dissolved into surprise, and he collapsed as suddenly as though a trapdoor had sprung open, his fingertips clutching at the edge of the podium as the image evaporated. Not quite two years later, she saw her best friend from high school stabbed in the groin by a drug freak in New York. Betty could see white-tipped pimples blossoming like night flowers across the killer's cheeks and forehead. Next, barely one month into her new job at the Tucson station, her bedroom ceiling transformed into a tableau as vast and detailed as a movie projected in cinemascope. Cold with sweat, feeling as though the image were some intruder descending on her body, she watched a DC-10 cartwheeling down a runway in a festoon of orange flame and black smoke. When it finally collided with a parked plane, both exploded in a burst that left her blinking, sightless, in the dark.

The senate candidate survived the bullet that pierced his right lung two days after her vision. But Tony died in the ambulance on his way to the hospital the day after she saw him stabbed. She had stayed up all night, calling his home in Newark, leaving messages with a dozen common friends. No one knew where he was staying in New York. But the fourth vision brought a new twist. When the jumbo airliner roared noiselessly into her bedroom in the air above her bed, it was already engulfed in smoke, the fuselage so blackened and twisted that even the name of the airlines was lost. But as it flipped over one last time before crashing full-length onto the other plane, the tail section swung forward, gigantic and distorted, like an image seen through an anamorphic lens. 517798. The numbers froze in her mind. She was at work eating a cup of yogurt when news of the crash came in over the wires. Someone had caught it on videotape. Over the next few days, Betty watched the footage obsessively, thinking of the numbers.

"Everybody will laugh at you!" her mother had shouted at her when Betty had told her about seeing the politician shot. "It was just a dream, Elizabeth.

You'll make a fool of yourself if you try to warn anyone, as if you could 'see the future.' Go to bed." She said the last words with scorn, then turned out the light in Betty's room and left.

Leave it alone, Betty told herself. *It's prideful, like mother said, to think you could have done any good*. Could she have made anonymous calls to every airline in the country, telling them a crazy story with only a partial registration number to give it some validity? Or the FAA, the NTSB? She knew, though, that some airlines listened seriously to warning calls from people claiming to be psychic. Could she have used her new reporter credentials to force someone to listen to her? She shook her head and jumped up from the cold bench. *Stop being morbid*. She began to draw water in the sink, determined to wash up the dirty dishes. But as the water ran, voices shouted from outside the RV, then the door rattled in its loose frame.

"Open up in there, Betty. Hurry!"

She turned off the faucet and began yanking on her clothes. "What is it, Larry?" she hollered. When she unlocked the door, it whipped free from her hand and crashed into the side of the van. "Can't I get one minute alone here?" she snapped. Three men stared up at her.

"You're on your way inside, Betty. Grab your gear and let's go. Phillip's attorney is going in today, and Phillip wants you to come with him."

—Two—

As the lawyer's open jeep bounced through the gates in the compound's barrier, he reached over and slapped her on the knee. "Ain't scared now, are ya?" He gave her a big grin, nicotine-stained teeth peeking through a scraggly fringe of moustache. Bronze reflector lenses hid his eyes; a long green visor jutted out from his bald head like a beak.

"Do you think Phillip Lorica is stable?" Betty asked, squinting into her camcorder's viewfinder. Panning the compound's open area and the exterior walls of the clustered buildings, she wondered if she could get the footage to her station before the feds grabbed it.

"He's just great. Personally, I love the man. But it wouldn't be his fault if he *was* nuts, what with all the weird shit those federal cowboys have been blasting through the loudspeakers all night. Where did they dig up those old Nancy Sinatra records, anyhow? How do you reporters sleep with all that God-awful noise?"

"Ear plugs," Betty answered, concentrating on her work and wishing Larry could have come to operate the camera. "And the air conditioner drowns out most of it."

"Government bastards are the ones to blame for the shoot-out, too," he grumbled. "When the hell you think those boys will learn from past mistakes, eh? This is goin' to the Supreme Court, you just wait and see. Look, there he is! Yo, Phil!" He jabbed a meaty fist at the horn, took off his visor and waved it grandly. Betty trained the camera on Phillip as he came into view, pressing a button for a slow zoom-in. Throwing the jeep into neutral, the lawyer laughed in a snort of roiling phlegm.

"You don't really think you'll be leaving with that videotape, now do ya, darlin'?" He wiped his hand across his mouth, then jumped to the ground and

strode over to the door, grabbing Phillip in a bear-hug. As Betty approached, Phillip's wife emerged from the building. When Betty offered her hand, the short, dark woman impulsively embraced her, then pulled back like a shy child, smiling and casting her eyes down.

"Do you remember me, Phillip?" Betty asked when the lawyer finally turned him loose.

"Didn't I ask for you specifically? Okay if I still call you Betty? It's a real honor to have you here. Rebecca and I are happy." He extended his hand forward, the palm upturned and open, fingers spread. His forearm was tanned brown as a nut, finely muscled in sloping planes with ridged veins. His fingers were long but thick and strong. Betty extended her hand and let him take it.

Hours later, final daylight retreated across the putty desert in shifting geometric screens. In the old water tower, high above Phillip's sleeping followers, Betty sat with Phillip, alone with him for the first time. He had insisted on talking with Betty in private, ignoring his lawyer's advice.

"Here," he said to her, "you can photograph me and the room, if you want to." He opened a metal file cabinet and took out a thirty-five millimeter camera with a flash attachment. "Sorry about taking all your equipment away. You understand the need, don't you?"

"Sure," Betty answered. "But the families outside would be glad to see that their relatives are safe. That might have brought you some public sympathy."

He waved one hand, laughing, then reached into the file cabinet again and retrieved a videocassette. "I'm way ahead of you. One of my guys shot this while we were at the prayer meeting today." He handed it to her, smiling. "He's a smart guy, used to shoot documentary films in the Middle East before he moved here. He kept you or Mike in almost every frame so that the FBI can't say the tape could have been shot weeks ago. I hope it brings some peace to the people waiting outside for news, Betty, I truly do."

She slipped the cassette into her canvas bag, then began taking shots of Phillip and the room. He gave her some formal, mock-serious poses, then said "Oh, shit" and began clowning. Holding up an old swimming trophy from his days at San Diego State, he pointed at it with a huge grin, told Betty to take a shot. Grinning wide to show two rows of small, even teeth, he pulled back the sleeve of his cotton shirt to expose a smooth, rounded bicep. "Let's show them we're not wasting away in here, Betty!" he laughed, pointing at his muscle with one finger.

Phillip's healthy bicep, like a round stone sheeted with cold water, symbolized for Betty everything she had seen that day. Nothing but images of a prospering, hard-working community. Phillip and Rebecca had ushered her from one scene of activity to another, through groups of happy, polite people busily gardening, cooking, plastering walls, teaching school. At first she tried to keep a tally of the population, but Phillip had also taken her note pad, and after counting sixty-seven different adults and twenty-one children, she lost track. The afternoon had ended with a prayer meeting in the compound's largest common room. Phillip dedicated the day's service to the families and friends of the two FBI agents killed by his people in the confrontation that had ended with the community's declaration of sanctuary.

"Dear God," Phillip had begun, standing on a raised platform before his people, an acoustic guitar hanging at his waist from an embroidered strap. He seemed like the best student in a group of high school graduates. The smartest,

the most handsome, the best-liked. The logical choice for someone to speak hopeful words about the future to his peers. “We ask you to forgive us for the sins we committed that day. Punish me, sweet Lord, and spare the souls of my people. Don’t let their deeds delay them on their journey to join your company. They were frightened and did what they thought I would want. The fault lies with me.”

Betty had watched from the back of the room, standing next to Rebecca. The room was darkened, and a single spotlight shone on Phillip’s long, angular face. One drop of sweat trickled down his brow and onto his nose. For a moment, it hung there, a bluish sparkle on his brown, smooth face.

“Got another roll of film, Phillip?” she asked, snapping open the camera’s magazine.

“Oh, come on, Betty,” he laughed, throwing himself into a chair and letting his arms fall open.

“You want to photograph the floorboards? I’ll be thinking you’re working for the FBI. Sit down and relax. Mike will be taking you back soon, so ask what you want. Here.” He opened a drawer in the desk on his right and tossed a spiral-bound notebook at her. “Take notes, if you want.”

“What do you do up here, Phillip?” she began, getting out her pen. “In this room, I mean.”

“Meditate and pray. And write. That’s what we built the room for. Kooky, eh?”

“Phillip, you know that there’s a great deal of concern about the children you have here. It was reported that one of them was hurt in the shoot-out.”

“The boy only got knocked to the ground, Betty. He’s fine.”

“Can you personally guarantee their safety?”

“No” he answered quickly. “I can only guarantee that the children are happy and loved and nurtured. It’s the people outside who are responsible for making sure they come to no harm in the future.” He picked up his guitar and set it in his lap. “Them and God,” he added, plucking a chord.

“But you could send them out,” Betty persisted. “Then there would be no chance at all they could be hurt.”

“Families can’t be broken up because of religious persecution, Betty. No mother or father here would give up their children, no matter what I told them. Besides, I don’t give my people orders. We all agree democratically on the community’s actions. I’m a spiritual helpmate for these people, not their dictator.” He turned his eyes from hers, his smile gone. Suddenly he looked very tired. Worry lines dug across his forehead. He took off his wire-rimmed glasses and rubbed his eyes.

“Are you mentally sound, Phillip?” Her voice was low, almost a whisper, but it echoed off the chamber’s sparse furnishings.

For several seconds, he said nothing, then set down the guitar and rose from his chair, pulling his body up to its well-known height of six feet, three inches. For the first time Betty noticed how long his legs were, how they flowed to a square compactness below a narrow waist. Although he was slender, his shoulders were so broad that she suddenly thought of the famous silhouette shot of Anthony Perkins outside the Bates mansion in *Psycho.*

“These questions are tedious, Betty,” he answered finally, turning to look at her. “We both know that. Next you’ll be asking me about my ‘free love’ philosophy. He raised his voice from his deep tenor to imitate hers: ‘Do you

really have ten wives, Phillip? Do you really have male lovers?' Or maybe 'Where's your arsenal, Phillip? Do you have machine guns? Bazookas? Hydrogen bombs?' Or how about 'Which militia groups do you support?'"

"Well, the public *is* interested in those things, Phillip, even if you choose to ridicule them." His nagging tone annoyed her. "And I *do* have a responsibility to—"

"Yeah, right," he cut in. "It's just fodder for the tabloid shows, Betty, we both know that. Why don't you let me show you something special instead? Something no one knows about me yet. Okay?" His voice was earnest and soft again, but with a touch of excitement, like a boy wanting to show off a new trick. He suddenly put both hands on the arms of her chair, bent over until his face was so close to hers they almost touched. "Interested?"

"What is it?" She made her tone sound bland, but suddenly felt a small tongue of fear at her heart. Unable to move, his two arms and lowered like a cage around her, she stared up into Phillip's eyes. Cold and clear as rainwater, they seemed to mock her. But he pushed himself off her chair like someone doing a push-up, then spun around on one foot, slapping his hands together in the air. Betty laughed nervously, then began scribbling notes in her own tangle of shorthand and abbreviations. As she wrote, Phillip walked to the back of the room and pulled back a floor-length drape. Behind it was a door made from scrap lumber, crudely fixed into an opening in a beaverboard partition.

"Don't go away, now," he said over his shoulder, then opened the door and slipped through.

Alone in the room, Betty looked around hastily, still writing, recording her impressions in free-form, trying to remember everything. Nothing seemed noteworthy, other than the four guitars scattered around the room and a set of shelves holding swimming trophies and framed photographs. She leaned closer to the shelf and began listing the book titles, but a noise made her look up. Her pen stopped in mid-stroke. The woman in the wheelchair was certainly the oldest one Betty had ever seen in person. She sat erect with her shoulders straight, but the top of her head was barely even with Phillip's waist. A snow-white scarf around her head was drawn down in front to the level of her eyebrows. Beneath it, her eyes were black specks entirely surrounded first by clear white, then by concentric circles of deep, grainy wrinkles. Her nose was long and bent, almost touching her upper lip.

"Now, who's this pretty young gal?" Her voice was so clear and sharp that Betty thought of the bells of Sarna that had hung on the front door in her parents' home, ringing the arrival of relatives, friends, happy afternoons.

"This is Betty Daniels, Grammy. She works for a television station in Tucson. Betty, this is my great-grandmother, Lillia Rogers."

Betty rose from her chair, wondering what to say.

"You don't need to ask," the woman laughed. "Everybody wants to know the same thing first. One hundred and ten years old next Tuesday." She pulled one tiny hand from beneath a lap rug and held it out.

Betty stooped to take the woman's hand. It felt like a feather with a willowy spine, but when she tried to let go, she found strength. "Let me hold your hand a spell, dearie," Lillia said. "Phillip, push me over there so as Miss Daniels can sit next to me."

Phillip wheeled her forward as Betty backed up in short steps, still held by the woman's grip. When she felt the chair hit the back of her legs, she sat

down. “Grammy, you’ll only be a hundred and five,” Phillip said loudly, tucking the rug closer around the woman’s waist before he got down on his knees next to her chair. “Don’t be telling Miss Daniels lies, now. She’s a reporter, and she’ll catch you. That’s what they pay her to do, you know.” He winked at Betty, and whispered to her: “Talk very loud. One of her hearing aids is dead.”

“Shoot, I just want to see what I get from the President when you’re a hundert and *ten*,” she grumbled, putting her other hand on Phillip’s head and winding her fingers through his loose brown curls. “You’d think he’d send more’n just another card to somebody who’s a hundert and *ten*! What’s he waiting for?”

“Grammy wants to ask you a favor,” Phillip told Betty. “I told her you might say yes, since it’s her birthday.”

“Yes, I do want a favor,” she agreed brightly, smiling to reveal a set of bright dentures. “Honey, will you call someone and make sure my card from the President gets to me here? And from his wife, too, it comes, you know. Both signatures. She’s pretty, don’t you think? I could ask Phillip’s lawyer to do it, but he’s so busy with all this foolishness. And besides,” she lowered her voice. “I don’t really like Mr. Cannenzi, even if I shouldn’t say so. Reminds me of an eggplant. Makes me think I’ll get squashed.”

“I have a friend who covers the White House,” Betty answered, feeling vaguely relieved. “I’ll make sure to call him about it. And I hope you don’t mind if I say that I’m glad to see you’re in such good health.”

“Yes, thank God, it’s a blessing, ’specially out here where we . . .” Her voice trailed off, but she continued staring intensely into Betty’s eyes. She squeezed her hand more tightly on Betty’s fingers, then jerked them toward her breast. Betty darted a look at Phillip, who pulled himself upward a bit, closer to Lillia. “Phillip, you didn’t never tell me this child can *see*!” The last word broke from her in a small explosion, as though the air had been knocked out of her.

Phillip met Betty’s glance, his smile wavering, then he patted Lillia’s arm. “Why, of course she can see, Grammy. What a strange thing to say.”

“I mean *see*,” she insisted, as though she were talking to fools. Her lips curled down and her large hooked nose quivered at the tip. She pulled her hand from Phillip’s hair and set it firmly on Betty’s. “There now, Miss Daniels. Lillia will make things all right.”

Betty froze for a moment, caught by the fierce, knowing light in black eyes. Then she quickly turned her face away, but not soon enough to keep Phillip from glimpsing the quiver of realization that vibrated the muscles in her cheeks.

“Oh,” Phillip said slowly, nodding and looking from Betty to Lillia. “I think I see what you mean, Gram.”

“This has been such a pleasure,” Betty said slowly. “Really wonderful to meet you, Mrs. Rogers.” Her words were dry and leaden, her throat parched. “But I believe Mr. Cannenzi must be waiting for me by now.”

“Oh, no,” Lillia said. “Oh, no no *no*. Now I know the whole thing. You can *see*, but you don’t know nothin’ ’bout how to *use* it. Oh, poor child. You need help, you do. Phillip, she can stay with us, right? You go right now and find a good room for her. One with a good bed.”

Betty slipped her hand free and stood up. “No, no, I need to get back, Mrs. Rogers. Now, tonight. I have a job, you see, and. . . . ” She broke off, looking at Phillip for help.

“Betty can’t stay with us, Grammy,” Phillip picked up. “I’m afraid she needs to go back, for many reasons. But maybe she’ll visit us again soon and you can talk with her some more, okay?”

“Later might be *too* late, Phillip. Lord, you young people! All the time in the world is what you think you have. Don’t you see how anyone with the gift needs to use it right? Look at her, now. Don’t need no gift to see all the suffering it’s caused her. Written on her face clear as day, it is.” She half-rose from her chair, one hand on Phillip’s shoulder and the other on the electric control box. Her temples and cheeks flushed bright red. “Stay here, Miss Daniels.” Her voice was still friendly, but breathless. “We can have a good talk and you can go back in the morning or the next day.”

But Betty was backing away as Phillip, still on one knee, gently supported his great-grandmother with his long arms, waiting patiently until she gave up trying to stand, then lowering her to a soft landing. When Betty saw him begin to fuss over her, his broad hands pulling on her robe and smoothing her kerchief, she felt a sharp, clawing hitch in her chest. She turned her back on them and walked to the door. She felt choked, stifled. But the door was locked.

“Just one second, Betty,” Phillip called. She could picture him bent at the waist over the woman, almost see his firm, red lips drawing close to kiss his great-grandmother’s cheek. She dug her fist between her breasts, pressing hard, waiting. In another minute, he was behind her, his hands pressing lightly on her shoulders. She wanted to pull away from him, but he gently turned her around.

“Please say good-bye to Grammy,” he whispered. “She’s afraid she frightened you.”

When Betty turned and looked across the room, the old woman was smiling. Behind her, the room’s only window had silvered into a glowing square with hard desert moonlight. The tiled floor around Lillia shone with the reflection, her wheelchair like a throne at the center of a forest clearing on a solstice night.

“Bye-bye, now,” she called. Beneath her kerchief, her face was a gnarled wooden knob. “You be careful, Miss Daniels.” She waved one hand up and down, like a child. “The Lord is with you. This old lady knows.”

Betty said her good-byes, tried to return the wave cheerfully. But when Phillip opened the door and she turned away from Lillia, she felt such despair she thought she might collapse. Beyond the door was a wide metal platform with steep wooden steps descending to the ground. The night air stung her awake, but it was harsh and empty, the sky full of stars cold and unreachable. Phillip stood close beside her, and against her will she leaned slightly into his side. Firm but bending, one warm, living thing in the night. Very slowly, he put one arm around her, letting his hand sit loosely on her shoulder. They stood silently, staring over the flat squares of roof into the arching sky spread before them. Betty thought of herself at college, walking across football fields and hot beaches on the Jersey shore, a group of girls laughing or silent, their thin, bare arms slung around each other’s shoulders in easy, fleeting camaraderie. Phillip’s presence, she thought. A conduit to all her happiest memories.

“I have to get back now,” she said, feeling stronger, but not wanting to leave.

“I suppose you do,” he answered. “But you can come back any day you want. Grammy says we can trust you. Hell, she says you’ll bring us nothing but

good fortune. She's very excited about the idea. Just call Mike when you want to come. Tell him I said to give you his emergency number. He guards it as though it were a direct line to heaven."

"How do you get your great-grandmother up here?" she asked, looking down the steps.

"I carry her," he said simply. "I like to have her close by me. And she seems to like it, too."

She turned to face him, tilting her chin upward, her eyes tearing from the sharp cold. "Take good care of your great-grandmother, Phillip. Promise me you will."

When he looked down at her, his face was relaxed and open, as receptive as the desert beyond them waiting to be searched. "Funny," he answered in a whisper. "That's just what she said to me about you."

Mike had his jeep warmed up and the canvas roof zipped shut when she and Phillip came walking around the corner. "You two took long enough!" he yelled. "Come on, I still got work to do tonight."

Betty stepped into the passenger seat and buckled herself in without answering him. The two men embraced again, then Mike lumbered in heavily and gave the accelerator a hard tap. "Quite a man, huh?" He plucked a cigar stub from the ashtray, struck a match.

Betty said nothing, staring through the bug-spattered windshield. Suddenly, she realized that she had never seen any mention of Lillia in all the research she had done on Phillip and his people. How could that have escaped her? Or how had Lillia escaped the news reports? Could Phillip be hiding something about her? Betty watched saw him now, standing motionless before a whitewashed wall, the headlight beams cutting through the darkness on both sides of him like white poles They ended in twin globes of light flattened like paper decorations on the wall.

—Three—

When she awoke, Larry was sitting next to her in a chair. She turned her head, saw that she was in her narrow bunk in the RV. "Finally you awake," he said, sounding too cheerful. "We were getting worried."

"Huh?" she asked stupidly. Looking down, she found herself still dressed in the clothes she had worn to the compound. But that was days ago, wasn't it?

"No, don't get up," he said quickly, putting one hand on her shoulder. "Lay still and let me get you some tea or something."

"What time is it, Larry?" she asked, sinking back onto the uncomfortable mattress. Did the square of faint daylight in the window belong to morning or dusk?

"Almost six in the evening, Bett. You've been asleep for going on fourteen hours now." He opened several cupboards, leaving all the doors open.

"There's no teapot, Larry. Use a saucepan. There's probably one in the oven. What the hell happened to me? And close the damn doors."

"Well, as far as we can tell, you fell asleep and had a ferocious nightmare while Cannenzi was driving you back from the compound. He says you woke up with a scream that made the hair on his ass stand up. His words, of course. Made him drive right into a ditch." After a pause: "Doesn't seem to be working," he said, peering into the water. She looked at him with one eye.

"You have to wait a few minutes, Larry. Find the tea bags. What happened then?"

"I *know* it takes a spell," he replied. "I just thought it did *something* right away. Maybe steam. Anyway, Cannenzi says that then you talked some nonsense he couldn't understand and fell right back to sleep. You didn't even wake up when we carried you in here. The doctor staying with the feds came over to look at you, but she diagnosed you as being asleep and told us to let you alone. I must admit, though, that I was just about to send someone into Tucson for another doctor." He turned to smile at her, then waved his arm around. "Look, we cleaned up the trailer while you were out. All the guys pitched in."

But she had stopped listening to him. Through the thick anaesthetizing layers of sleep, the images of last night's incident had begun to filter.

—Four—

"Why couldn't Samuels come out to the compound and let you do the interview there?" Fred asked largely, stomping around the room, making useless adjustments to furniture and framed photographs. Wherever he went, he neatened compulsively. Betty wished he had visited the RV a few times. "That would've been more dramatic." He straightened a lampshade. "You think the old hag is afraid of getting shot or just demoisturized?"

"Please shut up, Fred." In a tiny green room at a network affiliate in Tucson, Betty was staring into a mirror with a large smear of something oily across the center.

"You ain't nervous are ya, Bet? You've got this interview iced, totally iced. That prime time queen mother will eat up your insider information with a spoon. The big honchos are all starved for it."

"Stop using that moronic frat boy language!" She slapped her hand down on the dresser, whirling around to face him.

"Hey." His eyes narrowed, smile faded. "Watch yourself, Bet. You're not a superstar yet, you know."

"Just get out, Fred, please." He began to protest, but she raised her voice. "No, don't talk anymore, just leave!"

When he slammed the door in her face, she slumped down on a divan and started to shake with dry, gulping sobs. Her face in the mirror was pinched, her camera makeup runny with sweat.

Everybody will laugh at you, Elizabeth.

You can see, child, but you don't know how to use it.

The day after her visit to the compound, she had met with Arizona's Assistant Attorney General, the FBI's commanding officer, and several feds of lesser stature. She had told them that they must end the siege. That she knew it would end in disaster.

"Did you think they would just take your word for it?" she said into the mirror.

When they asked her how she knew, when they accused her of having learned something from Phillip Lorica, she went cold with the memory of her vision. A dam breaking before a dark torrent of colors, the jeep's windshield shattered. Through a ragged gash, a light shining brighter than any she had seen before. But she had pushed the images from her mind, unable to form the words that would tell her fantastic story. After they waited for long minutes,

she had finished miserably. “I don’t have any special knowledge. I simply realized, after being inside the compound, that Phillip Lorica and his followers don’t intend to harm to anyone.” Two of the men had openly laughed.

She glanced at her watch, then locked the door and reached into her purse for a tampon. Exactly three days after her trip inside the compound it had started. Clockwork. When she left the room, she found the set buzzing with pre-broadcast activity. Fred was standing on the sidelines, talking with Larry, while most of the others clustered around Samuels. “Sorry, Freddy,” she whispered in his ear as she passed. “I’m okay now.” She slapped him on the shoulder. “Just consider it a case of OTR.” His face broke into a grin as he gave her a double thumbs-up.

Loretta Samuels was standing at a counter, reading through some notes and ignoring everyone but a man touching up her hair. Betty began to introduce herself, but Samuels only glanced up briefly before returning to her notes and hairdresser. When Betty motioned her away from the man, she made no attempt to cover her irritation, but finally threw the papers down in a heap. For several minutes, the two women stood close together, apart from the others. Betty spoke quietly but rapidly.

“You’re going to say *what*?” Samuels yelled. She jerked herself away as though Betty had bitten her.

“Two minutes to air, Ms. Samuels,” the director said.

Lillia Rogers was sitting in her wheelchair on the makeshift stage in the community room, her hands folded neatly in her lap.

“I’m sorry to bring you together at this hour, friends,” Phillip began. “Yesterday we all agreed to break our ban on watching media coverage of our persecution in order to see Betty Daniels talk to Loretta Samuels. That interview begins in just a few minutes, but my great-grandmother wants to talk to you first. She has something to say concerning Betty Daniels. And most of you know how persistent my Grammy can be.”

“God bless you, Lillia,” someone shouted. Rebecca and others began to applaud.

Phillip stepped lightly off the stage, leaving the woman and her chair alone. She pushed the chair’s control lever and hummed over to the microphone. When she stopped, she looked up at the microphone in disgust, then out at the audience, shaking her head. “Phillip, get back up here and bring this thing down to my size,” she called to him. “You think I’m going to stand up and preach at one hundred and ten?”

Everyone laughed as Phillip, red-faced, jumped back onto the stage and adjusted the microphone. “Shoulda thought o’ that before,” Lillia scolded, making a face.

Phillip flapped both his hands in the air, shaking his head. “I can’t anticipate everything, Gram.” He took a place in the audience next to Rebecca.

Lillia stopped the laughter by raising one small hand. “Children,” she said into the silence, “I don’t talk to you all often, but today is special. There’s a woman out there, a reporter. The one you want to watch on the TV tonight. Phillip and I have met her. Well, two nights ago I touched that woman, and I saw that she has the gift. Clear as glass I knew. She can prophesy, and soon she’s going to see what will happen to all of you. To us, Phillip’s people.”

“Are you *insane*?” Samuels hollered straight into Betty’s face while Fred shrieked into her ear. On her other side, Larry was yelling at Fred to leave her alone. Abruptly, Samuels strode away, grabbed a phone, and began stalking around the set, ordering someone to contact her executive producer in New York.

“Everybody on your marks,” the director announced. “One minute to air, Ms. Samuels.”

She stopped shouting into the phone long enough to give the director a long, cold stare. He wrung his hands, darting glances in all directions. “Are you *all* as crazy as she is?” Her voice a cracking ice ridge.

“Get your bony ass over to those files and find some footage to kill the first few minutes.” She shook the phone at the director. “Go on, get!”

“I don’t know exactly what she’s gonna see,” Lillia continued. “You all know the Lord saw fit to take away my gift when I got too old. But I got a feeling, people, a feeling so strong it makes me feel young again. Or almost young, leastways. The Lord is telling me this woman will see us leaving this place, going to a new home that Phillip’ll find for us. She’ll be coming back to visit us soon, and Phillip and me, we’re going to pray to the Lord to help her to know what power He gave her. And when that’s done, she’ll see what we gotta do. I ain’t had a vision, mind you, but I know this is true right down in my bones. You all got to pray, too, because we can’t fail this girl. She’s all alone.” She stopped abruptly and took a long breath, wiping at her lips with the corner of a shawl.

“Praise God!” someone yelled, and others echoed the cry.

“Tell us, Mrs. Rogers!”

Rebecca was shaking with tears, her arms wrapped tightly around Phillip’s chest.

“Hallelujah!” Phillip yelled. He squeezed Rebecca tight against his body, at the same time swiftly kissing the forehead of the man on his left.

Samuels tossed the phone toward someone offstage, then grabbed a hand mirror from her assistant and took one last look at her face.

“Well?” squeaked the director, nearly bowing in front of her.

“Harvey says to go with it, so let’s roll.” She began arranging herself in her chair.

“No!” Fred and Larry yelled in one voice. Both men were trying to lead Betty away from the set.

“Ten seconds.”

“Turn that woman loose and get the hell off my set,” Samuels barked, half-rising. Her upswept red hair shook like a shield.

“And we’re on!”

Betty slid into her chair, snapping a mini-mic to her blouse as camera one tightened on Samuels’ face for the intro and update. As she finished, the red light on camera two winked on.

“Betty Daniels, a local television reporter,” Samuels began in her stage-voice, “is the first and only reporter to be allowed into the compound since the siege began. Betty was also the only newsperson at the compound twenty-one days ago when America’s newest bloody battle with anti-government extremists erupted. Eight federal agents were shot that day. Five of them died and a sixth

is still in critical condition. Most of you have already heard Betty's account in her own broadcasts from the site of the battle, but today, three days after her meeting with Phillip Lorica inside his embattled compound, Betty Daniels has more to tell us. She claims to have knowledge of a raid now being planned by federal agents. And she says the siege will end with a new tragedy if the attack is not stopped."

"Keep your faith in my great-grandson. Him and me will help that woman accept her gifts, and then—"

Heads suddenly turned to the window, which was shaking loudly in its frame.

"Well," Lillia said calmly. "Sounds like we'll get some rain, finally. Hope we don't get no flash floods."

"—dropped out of a helicopter onto the roof of a building near Phillip's tower, sometime after dark. They wore black clothing and had their faces striped with black paint. They were armed. I couldn't see everything they did, but they must have known in advance that the roof had a trapdoor, because they pried it open with a crowbar and began disappearing down the hole."

"And is that all you saw?" Samuels asked. She leaned closer, intent, encouraging.

"No. The angle of my perception changed then. And that's something that's never happened to me before."

In the pool at San Diego State, his pointed hands would break the water like a knife, his long, stretched body following, a tensed crescent, an arrow. When he graduated, he tried to forget the adrenaline excitement of competition, thinking it prideful and vain. But he could never forget cutting into cold water, the light changing from bright white to aqueous blue. The noise of the meet instantly muffled, lost.

Phillip was diving. He landed full-length between Lillia's chair and a shower of glass and wood scraps imploding from the wall. Springing up like a cat, he poised for an instant on all fours, then rushed forward and grabbed Lillia from her chair, wrapping his body around her as he jumped off the stage and ran to the back of the room. "Take Grammy and Rebecca into the basement," he said to the man he had kissed minutes ago. "Listen to me, Curt," he shouted, grabbing him by one shoulder and shaking hard.

Rebecca reached out for Phillip, wiping her hand across a bright patch of blood on his cheek.

"There's no time for that," he said, pulling her hand away. "Stay with Stephen and Grammy." He quickly transferred Lillia to Curt's arms, then bent closely over his great-grandmother's face. "You okay, honey?" he asked. A thin line of blood trailed down to his mouth. He licked it away.

Lillia opened her eyes, most of her face covered by a knitted scarf. She stared up at him for a moment, then Phillip roughly pushed Curt and Rebecca toward the door.

Gathered in a tight knot with Samuels at the center, they watched a studio monitor, silent. But Betty kept apart. When the network had interrupted the interview for a special news bulletin, she had frozen. She stared dully at the

backs turned toward her. Beyond them, a garish curtain of flame licked at the glass of the tiny screen. She heard a reporter's voice shouting "Inferno! Chaos!" More lurid reporter language. After several minutes passed, the others began talking in voices low and dead. Slowly, Betty stood up and left the room.

Someone called after her, maybe Larry. She heard Samuels say something about going back on the air. But Betty was already half-way down the corridor. She pushed against the bar of a heavy fire door leading to a stairwell. The striking of her heels against the iron steps began a chain of percussive echoes. The door's closing boom made the stairwell vibrate. She crossed one landing, descended another flight, crossed a second landing, and began descending again. Half-way down, she gripped the tubular metal railing, feeling it slip through her hand like a smooth cord connecting her to a distant, unknown place. She leaned heavily on it as she continued, her steps slowing until they stopped completely. Echoes lifted like ghosts through the stairwell, floating toward the ceiling several floors above. Betty began walking again, seeing nothing before her but the last image from her vision. Flame, bedlam. Lillia and Rebecca dead. And Phillip Lorica, his shirt burned from his broad smooth swimmer's chest. Beneath his feet, the wooden planking of the stairway to his meditation room burned away as he ran up the tower, the fire like a gulf widening to swallow him. A rifle in one hand. In the other, something Betty failed to see.

Girls' Stories

—One—

Is the ferry schedule still in the glove?" he would say. Or maybe "Should we do a cheap lunch today?" And she would answer him in abbreviated sentences with no superfluous adjectives or nouns, the terse clauses always ending with a slight down twist on the last syllable. "It's on the *left*" or "It's up to *you*." Fight number one had been about sex. Number two had begun with how far to drive in a single day and had expanded to include their different views on relaxing. Number three, whose shock waves still bounced back and forth between them across the gear shift on the car's floor, had been about sex. Now that he thought about it, maybe number two had also been about sex. He looked at her, driving, her long auburn hair flying around her head like a mass of razor-thin vipers, the expression in her eyes a mystery behind extra dark Blu-Blockers. In the sporty open car they had rented in Portland, manipulating the five-speed stick shift expertly as they roared

along P.E.I.'s narrow ribbons of road, she looked absolutely smashing. Watching her drive excited him in subtle ways: it was the sort of movie star image he knew he would always remember lovingly—except for the hard feelings he would also recall.

He—*they*, he corrected himself—had planned this trip for months, shaping it slowly through most of the bleak Maine and Minnesota winters each had impatiently endured. Their relationship had reached the monogamous-but-not-yet-fully-committed stage the previous summer, when they had met at an NEA Institute for art historians in Austin, Texas. During the seminar's five weeks, they had progressed from the stage of mutual attraction to lovemaking with a rapidity that surprised both of them. Forced to find privacy away from the university dorms where they both had roommates, they had gone to bed together for the first time in an almost-cheap motel lodged in the concrete forest of a huge shopping plaza. With ironic glee they had commented on the tackiness of the room, on the lurid light it cast on their fledgling relationship.

After the Institute had concluded, they had vacationed for two weeks in Mexico, discovering their compatibility with haste and zeal, always expecting the moment when one of them would reveal to the other some unacceptable, devastating flaw. During the following school year, he had visited her once in Minneapolis, she him twice in Orono. Still the dreaded revelations did not arrive, not even while they cohabited for a week in the cramped three rooms of her apartment. After each visit, Dan found he missed her more, even to the point of wondering if they could arrange to cohabit permanently. Both were discontent enough with their jobs to consider moving and the job markets in their different fields were expected to improve the following year, making relocation for one or both of them feasible. Without telling her, he began to imagine coming home to her night after night, always knowing someone would be in his bed at night—and who it would be.

Sideways, without turning his head to face her, he noted again her nicely curving bicep, watching it ripple lightly as she reached for fifth gear. From the first, he had liked the fact that she exercised seriously. Underneath him, the many firm swells of her torso and legs pushed against his skin with confident insistence, pure music to his body in a deep key. But his pleasure in appraising her muscle definition was ruined when he caught sight of two sullen grease marks just above the bicep, both stark black. He turned his head away from her to stare at the passing countryside.

"When we unload the bikes back at the cottage," she abruptly said, "let's just one of us do it. No sense in both of us getting greasi*er*."

He nodded assent, turning and smiling to signal her that he didn't perceive her remark as an 'I told you so.' She had made the same suggestion earlier, when they had rented the bikes. But he had brushed her opinion aside, assuring her they wouldn't get greasy if they were careful. Now he cringed at the recollection of arrogating such authority to himself. This surely would not enhance his negotiating position in the continuing sex wars.

"This is it," she said flatly, ending his thoughts, pulling up the emergency brake with a hard tug. Then, with a hint of real interest, "Look at the crowd."

They were several weeks ahead of the peak tourist season. Their cottage was rented at a discount and the touristy places like the tidal bore at Truro had been largely deserted. But here the parking lot was nearly full. In a corner

reserved for buses, ten or more sleek monsters were parked, displaying signs from Boston, New York, and Quebec.

Inwardly, Dan groaned, a response that was automatic whenever he knew he must add his body to a throng of rubberneckers. But as they stepped from the car, the buzz of activity that oppressed him seemed to enliven Ann. For the first time that day she began talking in a relaxed, honest way. Her sentences were less terse, her tone less factual.

"Look!" she almost shouted as they trudged through a hot expanse of unshaded parking lots. "You can see the roof and gables!"

Reaching just above a line of tree tops, a steeply-angled roof, dark green, jutted into the cloudless blue sky. As they drew closer, they could see a single, green-trimmed gable on the front, then walls of muted white, and finally the flower-bordered walkways leading to the house.

"It's exactly the way the books describe it," Ann said, walking slightly ahead of him. "But I pictured it larger."

Until this moment, he hadn't realized how great an impact *Anne of Green Gables* had made on her. Once or twice she had said she looked forward to seeing the historic site, but she had given no hint of such enthusiasm. Alone, Dan never would have dreamed of visiting the place, even though their cottage was only twenty minutes away. *Anne of Green Gables* was girls' stuff, so he had never read it. And from what he had heard, it sounded like pretty tame stuff. All the famous girls' books, so far as he knew, were 'tame.' *Little House on the Prairie*, *Little Women*, *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*. What was it with their obsession with *littleness*, anyway? They were all about quaint prepubescent struggles and heartaches. Why couldn't just one of them have some little girl drop her paper dolls and stowaway to the South Seas or the North Pole? It suddenly struck him that women—enlightened, modern women—must feel robbed by the sweet swill they were forced to read as children. They might have explored the whole world through fiction, but instead American culture had trapped them into stories about lost dolls and county fairs and skipped piano lessons. Dan wondered why Ann had any surviving affection for such books. Resentment would be easier to understand.

But she exhibited quite the opposite emotion as they made their way through the house, bumping through narrow doorways dividing the many small rooms in typical Edwardian style. Ann pointed out the bright green window shades, filled with pinholes. Were they originals? They paused to read the neatly-typed explanatory cards beneath certain items: "The famous scene in which little Anne gets tipsy undoubtedly refers to this wine carafe, hand-cut in the late . . ."

Feeling like a tame bull in a china shop in the ornate, overdressed rooms, Dan allowed his broad shoulders to be jostled along by the milling crowds. Occasionally he would mutter neutral responses to Ann's appreciative comments on the grand piano with fringed shawl, the mahogany dining table, the framed needlepoints. But he was wondering to himself how much longer they could avoid talking about why she refused to make love to him. It was inconceivable that they could continue, day after day, to let the topic simmer until actually getting into bed, but he suspected that she was quite capable of such silence. In fact, he had begun to perceive her as the type of woman who remedied a problem by 'letting it be,' an attitude that he abhorred on practical and theoretical grounds.

“Just let it be, Dan.” That’s precisely what she had said the first night of the trip, sailing on the Scotia Prince from Portland to Yarmouth. Nova Scotia had been his idea, and he knew as they boarded that it was a winner. Maneuvering the car into a postage-stamp parking space on the car deck that smelled of engine oil and fish, wending their way through narrow passages as they searched for their cabin, exploring the shoddily luxurious salons and gaming rooms: the rapid-fire auditory and visual imagery was endlessly stimulating. But best of all was the rich tactile sensation of standing on the promenade deck, tensing against the buffets of a cold Atlantic wind and smelling the black sea.

Leaning against the rail, his arm firmly wrapped around her shoulders, he whispered to her that during his boyhood, sea stories had been his favorites. *Treasure Island*, *Captains Courageous*, *Two Years Before the Mast*. He recited the names to her reverently, then added the names of others that he encountered later, when he began to discover ‘real literature’: *Omoo*, *Kon-Tiki*, *Benito Cereno*, *Typhoon*. Sonorous words carrying subtle promises of love and sensuality. Underneath a low, growing June moon, he murmured softly into her ear, relishing the burgeoning intimacy.

“Didn’t you always want to go to sea when you were a kid?” he had finished, sweeping one arm forward in an all-inclusive gesture.

“Not really,” she had said, gently removing herself from the circle of his arm and strolling casually down the deck. “I grew up in Iowa. Besides, I was raised on different reading fare. I was a girl, remember.”

Later, he should have been prepared for nonsense when she made no response to his insightful remark, as they retired to their cabin, that the sleek spartan economy of their room seemed to forbid carnal pleasures—thereby making them irresistible. Standing in the threshold, they surveyed the four narrow, single beds, arranged in two upper-lower pairs, that folded into the wall when unused; in one corner was a minuscule desk, in the other an area for coats and suitcases. The door to the bathroom opened by a heavy, metal J-shaped handle that fit neatly into his large grip. Walls and doors were made entirely of some gleaming white formica-like substance that was smoothly contoured at the corners and edges, suggesting the interiors of a movie set on a spaceship.

“It’s nice to see space used so efficiently,” she commented.

“It almost seems sinful to add body sweat and animal sounds to this environment, doesn’t it?” He was smiling rakishly at her, half in self-parody.

“Probably to some people, yes,” she replied ambiguously.

But she had waited—this is what angered him—until he actually tried to join her in the narrow bunk before telling him that she was exhausted and that the boat’s rocking had made her stomach queasy. He wasn’t too disappointed, was he?

Ridiculous in his jockey shorts, a modest triangle already forming below the elastic waistband, he had laughed, taken the high road, bent over and kissed her as she lay on her side, facing the wall. Then he had retreated to his own side of the two-foot rectangle of carpet that separated their berths.

“It’ll be fun to wait,” he had said with forced good cheer.

She said good night and thanks; he snapped off the light.

“Excuse me, sir,” said a sharp, nasal, woman’s voice into his face, jerking him back to the present. “Can’t you see I’m taping? Please wait.”

He and Ann stood on the threshold of an elegant sitting room, hung with thick mauve draperies that lowered the light to rosy dusk. In the room's very center, seated in a high ladderback rocker, was a young Japanese girl. Rocking primly, she beamed her smile directly into her mother's camcorder. She was dressed in Anne of Green Gables regalia: green stockings, some sort of checked gingham dress, and a wide-brimmed straw sun hat with green ribbons.

"All she's doing is rocking," Dan whispered to Ann. "We have to wait for this?"

"Quiet," Ann hissed. "The mother will hear you."

What had most caught Dan's attention since entering the house was the ethnic mixture of his fellow tourists. Nearly everyone but him and Ann was Japanese—or some sort of Asian, at least. He knew that Canadian and American tourism on P.E.I. was unusually low this season, due to new Canadian taxes, and he also knew that the Japanese yen was strong, which promoted their travel abroad. But it was still almost eerie to see this bastion of white western culture overrun by large Japanese families, each of which seemed to include a minimum of two sweet-faced little girls.

"Do you think *Anne of Green Gables* is really *this* popular in Japan?" he whispered to Ann. "Seems like a strange interface of cultures."

She elbowed him in the ribs, then leaned close and whispered into his ear, at last a note of amusement in her voice. "See her red pigtails? They're attached to the hat, you know, not the girl's head."

Dan snorted his approval, hoping that Green Gables might at least serve the purpose of putting Ann back into a good mood. The pall cast on their holiday by last night's scene certainly required some urgent amelioration.

Their first night in Nova Scotia, she had pulled a preemptive strategy to maintain her chastity. After driving most of the day, they had found a cheap bed and breakfast in Pictou, a short drive from where they would catch the ferry to PEI. The proprietor, a white-haired matron with a thick Scots accents, had shown them two rooms, one with a single king-size bed and one with two double beds. The door to the second room had barely swung open before Ann said, "We'll take this one." With their host in the room, Dan could hardly protest, but the door was scarcely shut behind her before he blurted out, "Is there some reason you suddenly don't want to share a bed with me? Is there something we should talk about here?"

"No, there's not," she answered in an indifferent tone, standing at a window with her back to him. "Let's not analyze it, Dan. And don't read so much significance into it."

"Seems as though there must be some significance there, Ann, considering that we've always slept together ever since Texas. I assumed that would continue, unless something happened. *Has* something happened?"

"No, no." She sounded impatient now, toying with a tassel hanging from the window shade. "I just don't feel sexy right now. And I don't want to talk about it."

He crossed the room to stand behind her. In the low dusty rays of a late sun, his tall form rose a foot or more above hers. He put his palms on her shoulder and gently pressed down. An explanation occurred to him.

"I think maybe you have the impression that I expect sex every time we sleep together, just because it's always been that way. But that's silly. It's

probably time, you know, that we start acting a bit more like a boring married couple."

He hoped to reverse their course toward a quarrel and perhaps at the same time to reveal something about himself to her. But suddenly, deliberately, she made the leap from discussion to argument.

"Don't you think you might find that difficult, considering that ever since we boarded the ship you've been behaving like a sex-starved sailor?" She stepped from underneath his hands and crossed the room to the suitcases.

Outside, a crimson sun was just sliding behind a row of houses. Dan squinted his eyes against glare that spread like mercury across a field of green and black rooftops. His lips, which she had once said were a trifle too firm, twisted downward in a rueful smile.

"Hey," he said, without turning to look at her, "I don't deserve that."

She made conciliatory remarks. He forbore expressing his justified anger and resentment. They behaved like responsible adults and the crisis was defused. Through the rest of the evening they avoided the topic, treating each other with consideration tinged by the formal feeling that follows sorrow or anger. Through the long dead spaces in conversation, Dan had resolutely avoided the suspicion that began to form in his mind: Ann had taken another lover since their last visit, one whose love-making she preferred to his.

"I think I've seen enough of Green Gables," Dan said, abruptly feeling smothered by the vague lighting and dusty fabrics. "It's too green, too gabled. You go on upstairs. I'll wait outside for you."

And he headed for the front entrance, leaving Ann staring after him with a puzzled expression. His forced retreat, however, was blocked by a gaggle of Japanese Annes, all in full drag, all with pig-tailed sunhats. They milled about him in the foyer, giggling in high chirrupy voices. Lightly they bumped against his long legs as he delicately stepped through the throng, a crane high-stepping through a low pond filled with sharp, irregular rocks. He heard words of Japanese exchanged between them; he saw secret glances traded. Smiling tightly and vaguely, nodding in indeterminate directions, not knowing if they were offering him greetings, he pressed with more determination toward the door, feeling that the girls were deliberately preventing his departure. After several long seconds of delicate maneuverings, he was confronted by one final pair of girls. They stood abreast, directly blocking his path through the open door. He took a step forward, but they stood fast, their faces frozen in smooth, too-innocent smiles. Giving way to his growing frustration, Dan impulsively reached forward, placed his hands firmly on the two heads of shiny black hair, and bodily separated them. They acquiesced, parting just far enough for his to take a single, long stride toward the bright rectangle of sunlight.

Then he winced. Something struck him—bit him? stabbed him?—high on the inner thigh. He gasped. This was no insect bite, not even from one of P.E.I.'s Godzillan mosquitoes, nor was it a pin left inside his trouser leg. Some damn thing had wounded him. He turned around to look at the girls, whose backs all abruptly turned on him as they retreated into the dusty shade of the front parlor. He heard more scattered whispers in Japanese as they disappeared.

"Damn!" he cursed, stepping outside. He looked down at his leg, where he saw a red blotch slowly seeping across the light-colored duck. "Shit!" He limped down the flagstone path to an ornate stone bench to take a better look. He tore the hole farther open and swabbed at the blood with his handkerchief.

Yes, there was a gash, about two inches long. In the second before fresh blood poured out, he saw a clean, hairline cut, almost hidden by the black hair on his inner thigh.

"What the hell?" he muttered, looking back at the house, then at the gash, then at the house again. "One of those little shits must have had a razor blade or a knife." Clumsily, he stanched the seeping blood, waiting impatiently for it to clot. Holding the drenched cloth in place, he rose and headed toward a low stone wall that divided the spacious upper and lower lawns. It was difficult to walk normally, clutching a wad of bloody cloth inches below his crotch, but he wished to be farther away from the stream of tourists—and from those little girls. Reaching the wall, he collapsed in a heap, sweating profusely. Both his hands were smeared with dark blood drying rapidly in the hot sun.

"Damn this tourist trap," he grunted. Ann owed him big for this one, more by the minute. Right now, they could be tearing along country roads on their bikes, or maybe swimming. Instead, he was blood-drenched and nauseated. Worse, he was the only man under thirty he had seen here. All the other males were fiftyish daddy types.

"Most of the females being little girls. Ugh." Although his perch on the low wall was far from comfortable, he presently began to feel groggy, eased by the sun's low, slanting rays into a restless stupor. To keep himself awake, he studied the architecture of the house, which he found perfectly undistinguished except for the two large gables, their roofs painted bright, true green. Soon, the light began falling directly on the roof, igniting the specks of quartz crystal in the shingles into a fiery patina speckled with green and yellow. "Green thoughts before a green house," he muttered, readjusting Andrew Marvell's line to his own surroundings.

Then he noticed that the window in the gable directly above him was raised. Surely it had been closed only a second ago, when he first sat down. He squinted against the V-shaped sheen of reflection framing the window, trying to make out a shape in the center of the window's dark square. As he strained, a young girl's face and shoulders came into focus. But this one was not Japanese: she was the very image of the real Anne of Green Gables, the mischievous little tyke herself in every detail. Dark red hair, freckles, blue eyes, turn of the century dress. As he stared, her features seemed to blaze at him, the blue eyes catching the sunlight and burning cold and bright as frozen sapphires. Expecting her to vanish, he blinked tears from his eyes. But the figure remained intact, and now another had joined it, the figure of a tall young Japanese woman whom he had seen in the house. He had noticed her because of her extreme ugliness. Behind large, red-framed glasses, the black eyes were dull, almost bleary. Across her flat cheekbones brownish freckles and red acne scars were scattered. The lips were fat, the nose broad and uptilted. In the house, Dan had nodded at her awkwardly as their paths crossed, a pleasantry which she had returned with a sullen pout. The same expression was on her face now, hardened this time into the lineaments of outright scorn and malevolence.

As he watched, she bent closer to the little red-haired girl, so close that their faces touched, but both of them continued to stare directly at him. As they returned his gaze, the long rays slid down the roof to a section below the dormer, completely enveloping the window in a harsh greenish glare that irradiated the two faces. Dan thought he saw the darker face merge into the white one, actually transfuse its blunt, vague features into the delicate

porcelain-doll features of the caucasian Anne. Then, without warning, the wavering green light shot into a straight line from the window, bolting on a trajectory that took it high above the roof. Gasping, Dan tilted his head back, trying to follow the green streak. From somewhere behind him came a high-pitched shriek.

"Huh?" he started, leaping from the bench and twirling around.

At the bottom of the lawn, at the edge of the forest, he saw two small forms wrestling, sparring with clumsy imitations of adults, each batting at the other with mis-aimed, open-handed slaps. "Boy am I sick of kids," Dan muttered, starting to turn away; but as he moved, one of the two combatants squarely socked the other one in the jaw, making the child's body crumple into a heap on the ground.

"Hey!" Dan shouted. "Hey, cut that out!" And he raced across the lawn to where the two kids were fighting, momentarily forgetting about the pain in his leg. "Hey!" he yelled again, traversing the lawn in long strides. The recipient of the knock-down punch was a boy about ten years old who now lay prone, belly-down, kicking his heels and flailing his arms. Astride him was a girl of the same age who had lifted the boy's shirt to expose his narrow white back and shoulders. As Dan ground to a halt, he realized that the girl was lashing at the boy with a ragged branch ripped from one of the nearby trees. Her fury in flogging the boy made Dan emit a long gasp of shock. Splattered across the boy's jutting shoulder blades were beads of blood. What Dan had thought at first were the boy's ordinary shouts of childish squabbling were cries of genuine pain.

"Stop that!" he shouted, bellowing so loudly he startled himself. He caught the girl's whip-hand as she lifted it high for another stroke. "Can't you see you're hurting him?"

For the first time, the girl acknowledged his presence, upturning her face. The grotesquely adult malevolence frozen on her face repulsed Dan so deeply that for a moment he lost his hold on her arm.

"Get up," he said, trying to control the quaver in his voice. He jerked the girl to her feet, twisted her by the wrist away from her victim, turned her loose, then reached down with both hands to hoist the boy, whose entire body was heaving in deep, violent shudders. As the boy got to his knees, Dan saw that he had thrown up as the girl lashed him.

"What the hell was this all about?" he yelled, turning to face the girl. "Do you realize you have hurt him very badly? Where are your parents?"

His answer came as a long, stinging stroke across his neck. He winced, staggering backward, and clutched at the sudden gash of pain. The little girl, still not uttering a word, abruptly threw her weapon onto the ground and began to sprint away from him toward the parking lot.

"You—!" Dan yelled after her, his voice cracking with anger and frustration. He almost added 'fucking bitch,' but at the last moment remembered the boy who stood behind him. And tourists milling around the small mansion at the top of the lawn might be watching the scene.

"Damnation!" he said under his breath. "Feed that little bitch to the sharks for two cents." Then he bent down to comfort the boy, who was self-consciously swiping at tears and snot with the back of his hand, trying to camouflage his loss of honor.

“You shouldn’t play so rough, pal,” Dan said, squatting down in front of the boy. “What’s your name?”

“Corbett,” he replied, in a voice raw with crying. “We weren’t playing rough, not at first. Just playing like we always do, playing pirates. But Sheila all of a sudden got mean.” He sniffled, fastening his eyes on the ground at his feet. “You’re not gonna tell no one, are you, mister?” he finished, looking up at Dan.

“No,” Dan answered. “Don’t worry. But I think you should tell your parents what happened, and then try to make friends with your sister.”

“Cousin,” the boy murmured.

Dan patted the boy on his head, then wiped away at the dirt streaks on his face with the handkerchief already bloody from his own run-in with bad-tempered little girls. He debated quickly over turning the boy around to look at his lacerated back. But suddenly he felt too vulnerable to suspicious onlookers and simply pulled the boy’s shirt down. Then he sent Corbett away, who was suddenly in a great hurry to remove himself from the scene. Exhausted, Dan limped back to his earlier perch and sagged onto the wall. Stretching out his legs, he glanced at the dormer above, recalling what had happened just before the fight had interrupted his reverie. The window was closed now, darkly blank, evincing nothing of the strange sight he had seen there only minutes before. Then he saw Ann approaching. She looked cool and relaxed, her remarkable hair tied back loosely by a long white scarf, the light material of her full skirt furling lightly around her hips. She was swinging a canvas bag with ‘Anne of Green Gables’ written on the side in green script.

“Hey, you’ve become the Fisher King,” she joked, sitting beside him and nodding at his pierced thigh. “What caused all the blood and sweat?” She ran her arm around his waist and moved close, pressing her side to his. “And your neck, too!” she exclaimed, pulling back and looking him in the eyes. “What have you been up to?”

“A little girl stabbed me,” he replied mournfully, pushing out his lower lip. “Then another one whipped me.”

Ann laughed and made some comforting noises into his ear, calling him her brave little boy. She nudged him with her elbow and he nudged back. Soon they were both laughing. For the first time in days, he felt comfortable with her. As their laughter increased, he told her his story in choppy, breathless sentences.

“A few seconds ago,” he said, trying to shush her laughter, “I saw the spitting image of Anne of GG in that window up there.” He motioned upward. “It was sort of creepy how she stared at me. Did you see anyone in there like that—a white girl, I mean? I thought maybe they have a costumed greeter, like Mickey and Donald at Disney World.”

“It couldn’t have been that window, Dan,” she replied, laughing at his joke. That room up there is closed off to the public for repairs. The guide told us so.”

He protested, but she was firm. Possibly to avoid even a mild disagreement, she changed the subject before he could tell her that he had also seen a Japanese woman in the room.

“By the way,” she started, “I discovered the reason for all the Japanese tourists. A schoolteacher I talked with in the house told me that *Anne of Green Gables* is a standard item on the curricula for Japanese grade schools.

According to her, the book is truly venerated in Japan, even more so than here. I was surprised."

"What a bizarre cultural borrowing," Dan pondered. "Too bad Japanese girls are fed the same fluff as Americans."

Shadows began to reach across the lawn toward them. There was a long pause before Ann answered. "You know, Dan, just because girls' books aren't about killing whales and finding lost treasure and subjugating indigenous peoples doesn't mean that they're insipid."

Before he could answer, she stood up, looking toward the house.

"I'll meet you at the car," she said. "I want to speak to that teacher again before we leave." And she strode away.

Dan watched her walking, then he saw someone emerge from the house into the shadows that now surrounded the entrance. For a moment, he could only see Ann's back as the two of them talked, but when she momentarily stepped aside, he glimpsed the face of her new friend. It was the same face he had seen in the window.

—Two—

The weather remained fair. Every day, a burning yellow sun ascended the sky, blazed in a cloudless sky of wedgewood blue throughout the day, then sank in a swirl of red and pink and orange that made even the locals stop and comment. Nights were dry and cool, emphatically dark in the way of rural lands with no city lights. Vacationers biked and swam and camped. Their numbers swelled as summer moved closer to the prime tourist season.

Dan was lying flat on his back on a raft in the middle of a small lake. His arms were folded under his head to make a pillow. Obscurely, he was smiling, content. As drops of water dried on his dark skin, beads of sweat emerged to replace them. He breathed deeply, expanding his chest and contracting his stomach muscles. Three days ago, he wouldn't have guessed that things could change so quickly.

The night after they visited Green Gables, she had explained her reluctance to have sex. It was the biological clock deal, although she hadn't used such a crass phrase in describing it. She went through phases in which recreational sex seemed pointless and sad, simply because it was not aimed at procreation. She didn't want a baby now, she assured him, but she knew she wanted one eventually, and that feeling, at times, was enough to destroy her enjoyment of sex. He had understood. He had held her, sitting on the cheap sofa in their cottage, while she told her story in short, disconnected bursts. Once or twice she had almost sobbed. Moved, he petted her. And although he didn't say it, he was secretly relieved that she was not getting her period.

Not until they got into bed had he realized how effectively their discussion had dispelled the specter of unconceived babies. That night, she was receptive to him, hesitant at first, but with increasing ardor as the night wore on. He had started with very womanly, low-impact lovemaking: minimal penetration and maximum touching. But as they proceeded, both became more intrigued by the mechanics of intercourse. Never satiated, they arranged their parts around each other in increasingly difficult and novel positions. They had fallen on each other with hard, impersonal determination until they heard the singing of morning birds. Then they had looked at each other's faces in

surprise, as though they were strangers. Grey light was lessening the cool dark of anonymity, reaching across the bed to their spent bodies as they fell away from each other, reached for sheets and covers, smoothed their hair and wiped sweat away from their faces.

This had become the texture of their days and nights. Everything else, in Dan's memory, seemed like punctuation points between lovemaking sessions. Once they had done it outside, standing up—a new experience for both of them, although Dan did not divulge his inexperience. She had instigated, almost demanded, it, which was becoming the natural chain of command. At first he had enjoyed seeing her so frank and assertive about what she wanted, but occasionally he felt like a buck private being put through a routine by a relentless drill instructor.

He stretched again, arcing his arms and legs upward, making a fulcrum of his rear. Anyway, all this sex made him feel ferociously attractive and well-made; he was sure he emitted a healthy, rosy glow wherever they went. Wryly, he regarded the blue bikini swim trunks that barely covered him decently. She had bought them for him in Charlottetown and insisted he wear them, something he never would have done without encouragement, although he knew his body was still compact enough to bear the scrutiny. Contentment suffused him as completely as the sun enveloped his languid form. But a frown crossed his face when he thought of the one fly in the ointment, that bitch of a schoolteacher. For no good reason, Ann had struck up a friendship with her, had actually gone off two or three times to join her for lunch or for strolling. Once the three of them had gone to a lobster supper together, but the group dynamic was a disaster. The teacher—Tokiro was her name—seemed to resent Dan's pointers on how to consume a whole lobster, even though both women were clearly ignorant of the fine points. He had tried his best to be interesting. He had asked intelligent, informed questions about Japanese politics. But nothing dispelled her sullen demeanor. Thinking back on it, Dan knew he should have foreseen trouble when the subject of girls' and boys' books came up. Innocently, he had asked why the Green Gables books appealed so strongly to Japanese girls.

"There's no special secret," she replied, frowning. "Their charm is sweet and simple and universal. First love, defying authority, facing death: themes like that appeal to all cultures. *Girls* of all cultures, anyway."

He might have left well enough alone, but he had advanced his new thesis about girls' books' upholding sexist, stereotypical views of what young girls should think and how they should behave. "I've talked about this a bit with some feminist friends in Orono—women friends," he lied smoothly. "They all told me that when they were kids, they read their brothers' books, things like *Tom Sawyer* and *Danny Dunn* and *The Hardy Boys*. Don't you think that's significant? Maybe girls who are on stereotype-destroying trajectories naturally gravitate toward the 'boys' stuff' because the 'girls' stuff' is so unimaginative. And what about the fact that boys *never* read the girls' books, although there seem to be plenty of girls who cross the line?"

"I don't think there's anything unimaginative about realism," Tokiro retorted, looking at Ann, not Dan. "And I don't see anything *necessarily* constructive about stories with time machines and atomic submarines. I read the boys' books, too, like your friends. But since you press your point, I might suggest that girls' books appeal to more mature tastes than boys' books simply

because girls mature faster. And in regard to why boys never read girls' books, perhaps the reason is that little boys are more paranoid than little girls about doing anything that goes against the prevailing gender stereotypes."

She turned to confront Dan directly, her murky black eyes for once looking sharp and bright. "And perhaps there's another reason. Maybe girls' books are high in content that only female readers can see, that is invisible altogether to males."

"You mean hidden messages?" Dan had asked, honestly interested. "Now there's something I've never thought about. Tell me more."

But Tokiro had refused to discuss it further. Silently, cheeks flushed, she glanced at Ann, who had listened to their discussion with a quizzical, faintly disapproving expression. When Dan importuned again for Tokiro to explain herself, Ann sharply told him to drop the subject. Abruptly, Tokiro excused herself to go to the women's room and moment's hesitation, Ann followed her. Several minutes later, Ann returned alone, telling Dan that Tokiro had suddenly felt tired and left. For the rest of that evening, both of them assiduously avoided mentioning the other woman and the debate over juvenile reading fare.

The two women were together right now, in fact, biking along a spectacular ocean road that Dan and Ann had discovered together. Tokiro was riding *his* bike, something that Dan found intensely annoying.

"I bet that's as close to a man as her crotch has gotten in a long time," he said into the bright air, then grimaced at his own malicious sniping. "Screw it," he said, standing up and poising himself at the edge of the raft. "She deserves it." After a moment's concentration, he sprang powerfully into the air, folded his body at the waist, thrust his legs upward and straightened into a perfect missile, his outstretched arms forming a spearhead that cleanly cut water. His shoulders, his chest, his legs disappeared in three smooth stages into the blue mirror. In his wake, sunlight refracted in a storm of flashing pinpoints.

—Three—

"So your girlfriend has got to be friends with Miss Tokiro, huh? Well, ain't that int'restin'?"

"Why?" Dan asked.

"Well, this is the fifth year I've drove up here from Boston and Miss *To-kí-ro*"—he exaggerated the breaks between the syllables as he pronounced the name, putting a comical emphasis on the 'ki'—"has been along for the ride every time. I dunno how many times she's made the trip altogether, but you'd sure as shit think she'd be tired of it by now. What the hell is there to see on this damn island, anyhow, 'cept the ocean and that damn Green Gables, o' course, which is 'bout as 'citin' as warm piss." He reached for a five-pack of cheap miniature cigars sitting on the table.

"And that Miss Tokiro is a complete bitch to me all the way up, you know, always givin' extra little orders just to remind me I'm a grunt driver. Let me tell ya, someone like her shows ya the whole attitude those Japs have toward America. We're just here to be pushed around, far as they're concerned."

Dan wanted to leave fat, but he tried gently to steer the driver back on track. Again Dan asked why it was interesting that Tokiro had become friends with Ann.

“It’s typical, that’s why,” the driver retorted, snorting and shaking his head. “Every time we get here she starts leeching on some couple. Never happens in Bar Harbor or Cape Breton, mind you, only here.” He fished a lighter from his shirt pocket and lit the cigar, then leaned back in his chair and reflected on the rising smoke. “A pattern, you might say,” he commented at last.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything odd about it,” Dan put it. “She’s probably just bored with the little girls she’s in charge of.”

“Oh, you think so, huh?” the driver said, fixing Dan with a hard stare and leaning closer to him across the small table. He downed the remnants of a draft, his fourth since Dan had started talking to him.

“Two o’ those women I’ve seen her with have come back here again the next year, but *not* with the men they were with before. They’ve come back in tour groups with their own batches o’ little school girls, one from New York City and then a second one from Bangor. And that’s not all.”

“What else?” Dan asked.

The man leaned still closer. “One o’ those men was found dead up here. Wadda ya make o’ that? Happened three years ago, two days after I started the drive back to Boston. I bet it wasn’t even in the papers ’round here, which is on account of the fact that the locals hush up such stuff. Bad for the touristy image, ya know. But I read it in a Bar Harbor paper. The guy was found dead at the bottom o’ one o’ those clay cliffs along the ocean. Killed in the fall, the paper said.”

“So what are you saying?” Dan broke in, unable to hide his impatience any longer. “That Tokiro is some sort of serial killer? That sounds pretty wild.”

“Shit, no, mister. Don’t ya get it? It’s worse than that. She’s a lesbian, o’ course. Part o’ some regular *organization* o’ lesbians, if ya ask me. Maybe that poor bastard killed hisself ’cause he couldn’t take the shame o’ being dumped for some dike. You gotta admit, that must be about the worst kind o’ shit a guy can fall into. Specially one as dog-awful ugly as that Tokiro. The man leaned back in his chair, taking a long drag on the cheroot, pleased with his solution to the mystery. He upended his glass and coaxed a few more drops onto his tongue, then licked his mouth all around.

Where the hell is Ann? Dan wondered, glancing again at the door. They had arranged to meet at the bar at six for a drink before dinner and it was now nearly eight. Before he had stumbled onto the driver, he had been torn between being annoyed at her tardiness and concerned for her safety. Now, in addition to that conflict, he wanted her to show up and prove to the driver that there was nothing wrong between them.

“So, where’s your girlfriend?” the man asked, an unpleasant, wheedling note in his voice. “Out rather late with Miss To-*ki*-ro, ain’t she?”

“Look,” Dan started, “maybe Tokiro is pretty unlikable. Maybe she’s even gay. But you can’t really believe what you’re implying, can you? It’s absurd.”

“Suit yourself,” the man shrugged. “I know what I’ve seen, all right. And anybody with half a brain can tell she’s a diesel dyke. Any normal guy, anyway.”

Wordlessly, Dan rose to his feet, tossed a few dollars on the table for his drink and left the table. As he reached the door, he heard the driver calling after him.

“If your girlfriend shows up,” he said, “I’ll tell her you were here.” And he guffawed with huge relish, alone at the table.

Hours later, a full moon rode low in the sky as Dan drove slowly down the ocean road. Since leaving the restaurant, he had traced Ann's probable bike route three times, gone back to check at the cottage twice, driven past the restaurant parking lot twice, and then had come back out to the scenic seaside drive for a fourth run. He had reached the point of genuine alarm hours ago; now he surveyed the silver-lighted clay bluffs with grimly restrained panic. He remembered seeing signs, the day he and Ann had biked along the path, warning against sudden crumblings of the cliff edges. On an impulse, he pulled the car over and stepped to the jagged edge. Far below him the rocky terrain of low tide sprawled across the dark red beach, well-lit by the moon's cold light. Beyond, the northern Atlantic was remote and still. Against his will, he recalled the dead man in the bus driver's story. He wondered exactly where the man died.

Wrenching his thoughts back to Ann, he returned to the car and began driving slowing again, still rejecting the thought of contacting the RCMP. There was one more option he could take before that—a ludicrous one, he knew, but the only one he could conceive. He slammed the car into fourth, jolted forward in a cloud of heavy clayish sand, and headed back to Cavendish, to Green Gables.

—Four—

The parking lot looked empty as he entered, but driving farther in he discovered three cars grouped together in one corner. Pulling up next to them, he saw that in the gap between two of the cars, a pair of bicycles was parked. *What the hell could they be doing here*? he wondered. *No one could like this place that much*. Slipping quietly out of the car, he cautiously crossed toward the house, standing for a moment on the edge of the lawn. At length, he elected to skirt around the lawns on the edge of the forest that faced the house. If he followed the forest's edge about fifty feet, he would come to a path leading into the woods, the 'Enchanted Forest' of the Anne books. From there, he would be able to survey the entire house and grounds. He quick-stepped across the lawn, hugging the line of trees. *How in hell can I explain myself if I come across a security guard?* But he reached the beaten path into the woods without hearing or seeing anyone. He glanced down the clearing, not liking the shadowed trees and thick bushes. With a gulp, he ventured in a few steps, just to conceal himself from anyone patrolling the grounds, then he turned to face the house. He was panting lightly, a stream of sweat along his hairline, despite the oncoming cool air.

The house looked down upon him from its perch high on a hill, settled heavily into the green-black darkness like a clenched fist. Overhead, enormous black cumuli floated across the sky, their edges rimmed in pale yellow by the swollen moon hanging just below them, close to the horizon. What should he do now? Hesitantly, he stepped forward, just as a hand firmly closed upon his arm from behind.

"Glad to see *you* here, pal. We've sure got our work cut out for us tonight."

Dan jumped straight up, spun one full circle in the air, and came down on his backside, sprawling on the hard dirt.

"What?" he spluttered, skittering backward like a crab, away from the voice. In the darkness, he could only discern the person's outline. "Who are you?"

"I'm Danny," he said. "Get up and come on. We can't let them find us here, you know."

"Who . . . who's 'they?'" Dan asked, pulling himself to his feet. "I'm only here looking for someone. For a woman named Ann."

The voice came closer. The source was a young boy, maybe twelve or thirteen years old. He had blond crew-cut hair and wore a striped T-shirt and shorts. Some sort of black leather harness was slung across his narrow shoulders. Shocked, Dan realized that it was made to hold rifle cartridges and grenades, several of which were visible, looking weirdly authentic.

"I've seen her," the boy nodded. "Golly, don't you think I know why you're here? They always come here looking for their *girlfriends*." He drew out the syllables of the last word, sounding disgusted.

"Happens all the time, but this year we're going to pay back that Anne. She'll be sorry now."

"What did you say about Ann?" Dan asked, glancing back toward the lawn and wondering if he should run. But this was only a *kid*.

"Not *your* Ann, dopey. The one who lived here. Now come on. The others are waiting."

The boy started trotting down a tributary path, so narrow that Dan hadn't noticed it before. He was left standing uncertainly at the juncture.

"You coming or not?" the boy yelled again, and Dan suddenly lurched into action, striding rapidly down the path until the boy came to a stop.

"Okay, this is it," Danny said. He removed a flat, black box from a pouch in the harness, jabbed a few buttons along the side, and began speaking into it.

"We're ready, Tom," he said, whispering now. "I've got the man with me. Seems as dopey as they always do. Bring us in *now*. Over." Turning to Dan, he motioned for him to stand closer. "Get ready, Dan. It'll only be a sec."

"Ready for *what*?" Dan cried. "What in hell is going on here? Look, I'm just—"

"Yeah, yeah," Danny snorted. "Looking for your girlfriend. Ya told me. Stop whining, huh? Here we go."

A few feet before them, suspended several feet above the ground, a shining, yellow disc appeared. As they watched, it began to rotate, dispersing green and red streamers in scattered segments through the black air. The speed increased, and a dull whirring noise began to drone. Dan watched, mesmerized, as the disc expanded in diameter, the drone swelling to deafening volume.

"What's happening?" he shouted at his companion. He felt the hair on his arms and the back of his neck lifting.

"Almost there," the boy shouted, pitching his reedy voice at top volume. "Brace yourself now. That static will kick some."

Without warning, Dan felt the jolt of a mean mule kicking his gut, one double-blast after another. He bent over double, clutching at his stomach in pain. A flurry of blinding light flooded his vision. Purple and red starbursts exploded around him against a field of stark white. Despite the pain, he felt strangely airborne, almost disembodied. The ground fell away below him and slowly he began to spin, gaining speed to match the pulsating rhythm that was

filling his ears. Somewhere, far off, someone was shouting at him. After what seemed like hours of spinning, of throbbing, of weightlessness, of pain, he heard a second voice joined to the first. Slowly, he began to feel anchored on earth again.

"You okay, pal?" Danny was kneeling next to him. Dan lay utterly limp on his back.

"That damn gizmo's gonna kill somebody someday." The second voice sounded older, deeper. "Get him up and let's get started. Time's flying."

Trying to boost Dan to his feet, straining against the man's greater weight, Danny whispered petulantly into his ear: "It's a good invention. Tom just don't know how to work this end of it. He's always bossing us around."

"Right," Dan muttered, trying to clear his head with a few hard shakes. Opening his eyes, he found that he was standing in an enormous cavern. Electric lights were strung along the walls, illuminating piles of military hardware and electrical supplies. He saw packing crates filled with wire, tools, and electrical cords. Along one wall stood racks of handguns and rifles, some of them with gleaming futuristic chrome scopes. The mouth of the cavern was closed off by a plate of steel that slid down from the ceiling in long metal tracks.

"I'm Tom," the other boy said, stepping forward and extending his hand. "Tom Swift. Are you ready to teach those little bitches a good lesson? Get your girl back? Be a hero?"

He was obviously older than the others, maybe seventeen, with short-cropped, spiky hair and dark, deep-set eyes. He wore a drab army cap, baggy camouflage pants, and high-laced black boots. Above the waist, he was naked except for two cartridge belts that crossed his frame with an X. An automatic weapon hung from one shoulder.

"I think I need to sit down," Dan said weakly. "Call me when the heavy shooting starts."

Tom looked at him grimly, then turned around sharply and busied himself with a hand-held device of unknown functions.

"And if you can call in your dirigible or giant magnet, now might be the right time," Dan called after him, stifling manic giggling.

"Don't cross Tom," Danny hissed into Dan's ear. "He gets real antsy this time of year.

"We've got readings!" a voice called from the far end of the cavern. Another teenage youth turned around and called to Tom. "Movement inside the perimeter, Tom. Fifty meters from the gate and closing."

"That's impossible," Tom yelled. "No *way* could they get past those ion concentrators I rigged up."

"Forty-five meters," the other boy responded. Dan heard a quiver of fear in the young voice.

"Ready the missiles," Danny shouted. "Tommy, let them taste those atomics!"

Suddenly, chaos exploded. One group of boys rushed down the length of the cavern and began reinforcing the gate with long steel poles whose tapered ends fitted into grooves cut into the stone floor. Danny and Tom were wildly attending to the knobs and gauges on a lighted control panel. Other boys were cracking open the gun racks and quickly distributing arms.

"Five. Four. Three." Danny was shouting above the din. "Two. One. Mark. Duck!"

Dan and the others hit the deck as shock waves began ripping through the chamber. Several metal poles affixed with floodlights crashed to the ground, sending up clouds of sparks and smoke. For long minutes, the floor heaved wildly, like the back of a rodeo bronco. Dan clung to a heavy case as it went skittering along the floor, hoping it didn't pin him against a wall. As the tremors ceased, he skidded to a stop near Danny, who was lying face-down, one arm painfully twisted behind his back and groping into the air, like that of a drowning man.

"Hey!" he called to the boy, reaching out to help him up. "You okay?"

But when he lifted the lithe frame and turned the boy over, he saw a trail of blood coming from the mouth. He touched the boy's hair and felt a long, damp gash along the back of the skull.

"He's dead," Dan said; then, raising his voice, fury swelling inside him: "This boy is really *dead*. You, Tom, whatever the hell your name is, this kid is dead. What kind of games are you playing here?"

He jumped up and grabbed Tom by the leather x crossing his chest, lifting him straight off his feet.

"He's not the only dead one," Tom said, his face momentarily covered with misery. "But we can't give up now. And we've got to stick together, man."

He looked into Dan's eyes with fresh resolve, but there was also a note of pleading there. Slowly, Dan loosened his hold on the boy.

"Ten meters," the boy at the tracking station intoned. "Tom! Only ten more meters! Gee whiz, what the heck are we gonna do if—"

"Shut up!" Tom bellowed. "Everybody get to your stations. You know what—"

But his words were clipped off by a ripping screech from the cavern's mouth. Dan whirled around to see the gate burst open from outside, huge shards of steel peppering the crowd of boys who stood closest. Tom yanked at Dan's sleeve, then threw himself full length upon the ground; Dan did the same, but after a second, he shifted his position so that his own body shielded the younger one lying by his side. The air filled with screams of agony as jagged steel lances pierced the bodies of Tom's boy army. Through a heavy miasma of smoke, Dan saw contorted forms falling in spasms to the floor, hands clutching at gaping wounds and missing limbs. He ground his teeth against the sight, feeling that he would be sick. Blood began to gather in sodden pools and rivulets a few inches from where he lay on top of Tom. A huge piece of the gate collapsed inward with an enormous crash. Then there was silence.

Slowly, Dan crawled to his feet, then quickly lifted Tom upright. All signs of determination and willingness had been wiped from the boy's expression. His lower lip trembled slightly as Dan dusted him off; his eyes danced around the room without focusing. Dan felt a sudden, urgent rush of pity for him, but he could find no words to console him.

"So," a voice called from the devastation at the front of the cave. "It comes to this, again. Your silly inventions are as useless as ever against us."

Standing in a line between Dan and the slaughtered boys was a group of girls, twenty or more, including the gaggle of tots who had ambushed him inside the door of Green Gables. At the center of the line, taller than all the others, stood Tokiro. A vicious smile was fixed to her face. At her right, slightly behind her, stood the low figure of the little Anne whom Dan had seen in the window. From beneath her straw sunhat, she smiled primly at him.

“You bitch!” Dan cried, shoving Tom behind him. “Is this what you want, after all? This death?”

“Do you remember the ‘hidden messages’ you sarcastically referred to, you fool?” Tokiro’s voice was silken and sinister, her fat eyes narrowed to gleaming slits. “Well, now you see this was no joke. *Our* books are about power too, just like yours, but with a difference. Our books teach us how to wait, and what to do when the waiting is over. The lessons in our books are spoken only to us, whereas any moron, boy or girl, can take everything that your stupid stories contain. And yes, Dan”—she spat out his name—“*our* books taught us how to fight, too.”

Willing soldiers, the flock of girls stormed forward, toppling Dan like a bottom-heavy sack of grain. He winced as his head fell back against solid rock, almost knocking him out. But a sound of distress from inside the cave kept him from going under. Turning his head, he saw Tom being pulled down by a roiling mass of jumper-clad Anne look-alikes. For one second, Dan saw Tom’s face twisted in terror, then the boy’s shoulders and head slipped down within the circle. A sound of frenzied tearing began, as though a baby dolphin had been thrown to a school of sharks.

“No,” Dan thought wildly. “This is a nightmare. It’s not happening.”

In a burst, he overcame the dark mists that were descending before his eyes; lunging forward, he knocked aside several girls who formed a wall in front of Tokiro and her tiny, red-haired companion. He saw small bodies falling to the ground as though in slow motion, a chaotic jumble of arms and legs. More of them clustered closely around Tokiro and Anne, but he tore through the pack, brutally punching and jabbing at tiny faces, flailing his head from side to side, desperate to reach the small one who stood behind them, frantic to get his hands upon the author of this madness. For one second, he succeeded. At last he had her throat between his hands. He saw her self-confident smile vanish, the lips part in vague alarm, he heard a cry begin to whisper through her bright red lips. The blue eyes became immensely wide, panic-filled. Dan tightened his grip, intoxicated by the gasping rattle that jerked from her mouth. But things were stabbing at him below the waist; all down his legs, he felt his flesh ripping in rents; he began to slip in blood as he tried to maintain his throttle-hold on the child, ignoring the pain.

Finally, his grip was broken. He saw Anne retreating from him as his agony became unbearable. Tokiro stood before him, now yielding a long stiletto knife.

“Now!” she shrieked. “Lay him down!”

Full length, he toppled backward, the impact sending new waves of pain through his back and shoulders. Barely conscious, he looked down to discover that below his blood-soaked shirt-tails, he was naked, the trousers yanked down to his sneakers. Two cords had been attached to his ankles, his legs drawn apart. With his final strength, he lifted his head higher and saw that the girls had pulled back to form a circle around him—all except Tokiro, who stood at his feet, now holding her stiletto down at her side, poised as though hushed by the ceremony of the moment. Slowly, the knife’s sharp tip moved toward him. With unbearable insistence, it began tracing a path up the inside of his left leg. Fresh horror reviving him, he gathered all his strength to rise to his feet, but discovered that he was also tied down by his hands, his waist, even his throat.

“No!” he screamed. He thrust his body against the bonds until they cut through his skin. Wildly he gyrated his head from side to side, insensate to the quakes of pain that flowed from his brain stem down his spine and radiated across his skull. Night sky had been replaced by blue. Sunlight poured upon him. A single fleecy cloud, a section of treetop, a cliff’s rocky face. And Ann, *his* Ann, her features serene and clear, looking down at him from a great height.

“Ann!” he shouted. “Ann, help me. Please!”

She made no movement, only stared back impassively, her wonderful red hair unleashed into the gentle summery breezes. But words in her voice drifted down to him, each one separate and plain, like three squares of white paper lazily descending. As they arrived, a smile crossed her face, as though she remembered something sweetly.

“Say you’re sorry.”

“For what?” he cried, a spray of blood spitting from his lips high into the air.

“For everything,” Tokiro’s voice said, closer to him.

He gulped, realizing that there was still a new horizon of pain to experience. Tokiro’s knife had finished its delicate caress up his leg. He looked down again to see her leaning close. Her right shoulder lifted as she prepared for the final upward thrust, her knife at its mark. Their eyes locked as Dan’s expanded to their utmost, watching Tokiro’s shoulder begin to swing forward.

“No! he screamed, throwing his head back against the stony ground, thrashing with all his power against his bonds. “No!”

But just as he expected the searing cut of Tokiro’s knife, nothing happened. He wondered if his mind was so filled with pain that nothing new could register, but somehow he knew that the final cut, the unthinkable, had not occurred. He lifted his head slightly, opening his eyes. A bizarre scene met his stare. In a flurry of green stockings and white petticoats, the many Annes were being put to flight, routed by a band of men dressed in odd garb and brandishing what looked like cutlasses from old pirate movies. The girls screamed, running hither and yon, scrambling over the boulders dotting the landscape, some of them seeking refuge in the cave. Tokiro was nowhere to be seen.

“We must be quick, my friend,” a voice said into his ear. “We can never hold them at bay forever.”

Dan felt the pinion at his neck release, followed by those at his hands and ankles. A second later, he was being lifted from behind. As he was hoisted to a shaky purchase on his feet, he turned his neck to face the assisting stranger. It was a man his own age and of the same height, but there the resemblance stopped, for this man who held him upright, helped him to gain balance on his quivering legs, was like no other Dan had ever seen. Blond curls tossed about his head like the crisp, thin shavings of wood that fly in ribbons from a levelling plane. His eyes were the dark blue of the sea at twilight, the lips narrow and red. He wore a simple jersey striped with red and white, the short sleeves tightly hugging the large, rounded muscles in his arms. At his finely drawn throat a blue scarf was knotted. In one ear hung a golden ring.

Dan fumbled for a word that would not seem inadequate. Finally, in a thin croak, he said, “I know you.”

“Course you do, mate,” the stranger replied with good cheer in his voice. “The name is William, but no one calls me nothing but Billy. Now we must retreat, for soon it will be full dark.”

Stifling the questions that rushed to his lips, Dan took one step forward in the direction his new companion indicated. But his legs were like the stalks of sea plants. He collapsed forward, the pain that still flowed through his body reaching a crescendo. Gently, Billy caught him under the shoulders.

“Allow me,” the stranger said. “Just relax.”

And then Dan felt himself being swung upward. For an instant, the pain reached a new pitch, but as his torso settled down onto Billy’s shoulders, he felt some security, some safety, for the first time since the night began. The other men, those who had chased away Tokiro and her army, were regathering, exchanging urgent whispers with Billy. But Dan’s focus was drifting, borne away on a rough tide of hurt, dwindling like the last rays of sunlight that filtered heavily into his eyes, carried away from him as his body was being carried away from the scene of aimless death by the strong and capable sailor.

—Five—

He awoke in darkness. A few feet away a torch burned smokily atop a long pole planted in the dirt floor. He lay in a rope hammock that rocked gently as he lifted his head and peered about. Billy was nowhere to be seen, nor anyone else. By the flickering light he ascertained that he was inside a small hut, apparently made of bamboo with a thatched roof of green fronds. Cautiously, he tried to move his legs.

“No,” a soft voice spoke from the darkness.

Dan froze. It was a woman’s voice. His instincts told him to run. But his legs and arms would respond to his commands only with pitiful jerks and tremors. As he struggled, staring in the direction from which the voice had come, a woman’s form emerged from the shadows that licked the walls of the structure.

“No,” the voice gently repeated, a voice deep and rich. One hand was laid on his forehead, folding the hair back from his forehead, while the other found his nearest shoulder, pressing him back into the hammock’s webbing.

Slowly, the woman began rubbing the knotted muscles in his arms and shoulders. In the dusky light, Dan saw that she wore only a short sarong that reached to her knees; from the waist up, her dark skin was smooth and bare. As she massaged him with expert skill, he watched her large, dark breasts swing from side to side. A wave of long black hair reached below her shoulders, draped behind her ear on one side, where it was fixed with a single white exotic flower.

Dan sighed far back in his throat, relaxing into her caresses and the hammock’s lilting motion. Looking downward, he noticed for the first time that he had been undressed while he was unconscious. A thin garment, like the woman’s, was loosely tied at his waist. Surveying his body, he realized that he had been thoroughly washed while he slept. The profusion of cuts and abrasions on his torso and legs had been dressed with a greenish substance that simultaneously felt cool and warm. A clear oil had been spread over him that shimmered lightly on the peaks and valleys of his body as he stretched and twisted in a swelling tide of luxury under the girl’s soothing hands. As she

continued to knead and press, strength and calm ebbed back into his muscles and joints, down even into his cells and veins. Off to his right, visible through a small window roughly cut into the bamboo wall, a harsh silver moon had ascended above a line of trees, throwing a cold carpet of light onto his supine body. With quiet fascination, Dan watched the girl's hands play up and down his chest and torso, then to his legs, rubbing the long muscles running from the upper thigh to the knee. In the thin white light, he could see only her hands, and occasionally, when she bent low, the tips of her perfect breasts. Without stopping their light play, one of the hands reached under his sarong.

"Yes?" The girl's voice came to him as though from far away. "Yes?'

Dan nodded, which brought the dark head of hair close to his chest. With almost painful delicacy, a tongue was soon tracing a path across the topography of his upper body, pausing at each of the nipples, searching out the sculpted ravines of his abdomen, finding its way with vast slowness to the line of crisper hair that started just below his navel. Drowsily aroused, Dan moaned softly, a sense of detachment from everything around him growing steadily, an icy separation from everything but the rhythm of blood pounding through his veins, the sound of his own heart.

"Feeling better, friend?" A voice spoke to him as though in a dream.

Opening his eyes, he saw Billy's face inches from his own, the ruddy tan now suffused with pallid moonlight. The eyes, however, were even brighter than before, the full lips a dark but luminous red.

"Where am I?" Dan struggled to say.

"In our own little paradise, mate, and I'm honored to have you here. Now don't talk. Just enjoy her."

And Dan was powerless to do anything else, for the girl's attentions were now more urgent, bringing him to total disconcern for where he was and for the fact that he was being watched. His body tensed incrementally, beginning with the muscles radiating from his groin, eventually spreading into the banners of sinew. All the while, he continued gazing at Billy's suspended visage, smiling down upon him, earnestly returning his gaze as though he could feel what Dan was feeling. Smiling himself, Dan shifted slightly in the hammock, tensing his hips upward toward the girl, holding himself immobile for an endless moment until he finally relaxed, a long hot breath escaping his lips as Billy's features melted into the silver and black, leaving the blue eyes, still shining, glinting with knowing humor.

In the long silence that followed, Dan was vaguely aware of the girl receding into the darkness beyond the torch's leaping flame. Billy remained close, continuing his frank regard of Dan's condition. And then there was a new sound of padding feet as Billy's friends, the men who had harried Tokiro and her companions, began trooping into the room. All of them now, except for Billy, were dressed as Dan was. They gathered around Dan and stood looking down at him, their dark golden shoulders forming a solid, protecting wall around him. With Billy's help, Dan pulled himself into a precarious sitting position on the edge of the swaying hammock.

"Our new mate's been tasting the pleasures of the place," Billy said to his comrades. A low murmur of approval rippled around the hammock.

"Did she please you, mate?" Billy asked, reaching down and roughly tousling Dan's hair.

“Yes,” Dan said, laughing, not knowing whether to feel embarrassed. “Extremely.”

“Good,” Billy laughed to him. “Your body shows it.” Then, speaking to one of the other men, he said, “Bring her over here.” There was a new note in his voice, one of hard determination, almost of malice. Dan watched as one of the men stepped away, then returned, dragging the girl by one arm. In her face, Dan saw a twist of instant terror. She said nothing, but a raspy choke escaped her parted lips.

“Here we go,” Billy said. And as Dan stared, helpless, Billy removed a long, gleaming dagger from a small sheath attached to his trousers. Yellow flashes shot from it in all directions as he raised it to the torch and held it by its jute-laced handle in the heart of the flames.

“What?” Dan said. “What the hell do you need that for?”

But in another second he knew. In one smooth arc, Billy swung the dagger downward, the blade whistling a softly glowing note of red through the darkness. As Dan struggled to jump from the hammock, the dagger drove directly into the woman’s chest. Burning hot, the knife hissed in anger as it sank deep into the wetness under her skin. A hard twist of Billy’s wrist, a long minute during which the blade hung still, planted deeply inside the flesh, then another twist, a backward pull, and the knife retracted neatly, leaving only a thin red line as a sign of its penetration. The woman slumped to her knees, a first pulse of blood spurting through the fingers that clutched at her chest. Dan saw her look first at the wound, then at him.

Dan sprang to his feet, reaching to support the woman.

“Are you crazy?” he shouted. “What the hell did you do that for?” The warm body was slipping through his hands as he spoke. In a gentle rustle, it collapsed onto the rushes scattered across the floor. Dan knelt beside her, knowing it was useless to try to revive her.

“Answer me!” he yelled, whirling around to face the line of men, feeling that his brain was about to explode through the back of his head.

“Relax, mate.” The answer came from behind his shoulder. “What do you think she’s here for?”

The voice was Billy’s, but it was also different. Gone were the dancing inflections, the lilts of humor and camaraderie. A throaty rasp now exhaled a foul stench into the hut. Dan caught his breath against it, just as a low, malevolent growl began behind him, as loud as a load of gravel sliding down the rusty ramp of a dump truck. Dan turned to face him, but instantly he leaped backward, colliding with the nearby pole and spilling the flaming brazier directly onto his bared chest. He yelped, feinting sideways, frantically batting at the angry pinpricks of red that cascaded down his abdomen. The mingled oil and sweat smeared across his skin kept the burns insignificant, but for a moment one edge of the thin material of his sarong began to smolder, which he suffocated by clamping it between the palms of his hands, grinding his teeth against the fiery pangs.

When he looked up again, the gang of sailors was standing close together, watching him dispassionately. At least, Dan guessed from their posture that it was dispassion, for no emotions now registered in their eyes—or in the sockets where their eyes had been. A dozen pair of gaping black holes had replaced the men’s eyes, sunk into depthless sockets rimmed with shooting veins of yellowish red. Dan stepped further away, treading on the still-burning

embers of the fallen torch. But the hot teeth that bit into the softness of his soles hardly fazed him, so great was his fixation on the scene before him.

The men, his saviors from the nightmare at the cave, had metamorphosed. The figures that lurched toward him were creatures from some tortured hallucination, from some forgotten hell. The robust, dashing sailors, the graceful and powerful physiques, the golden spirit: all of it now had collapsed into blackened, pock-ridden frames of rotting skin that shimmered liquidly as the throng shuffled. Billy, what had been Billy, recognizable now only by the ring that still hung from one ear was opening his mouth to speak, exposing the only teeth left in his mouth, two incisors the size of a wolf's fangs, the curved shanks aged into a moldy brown like pieces of ivory left to bake in the sun.

Dan tried to speak, to tell them to stay away, but his lips would do nothing by tremble. Abruptly, he felt stalks of bamboo brush against his back, and only then did he realize that he had been moving, unconsciously retreating, all this time. Now he was trapped.

The Billy-figure, when it was no more than five feet away, stopped its advance. The rotted, greenish lips twisted into a perverted smile as he stared silently at Dan, who slowly pressed himself flat against the wall at his back. Billy's mates, looked on dumbly, seemingly waiting for some signal from their leader before staggering forward and laying their hands upon Dan and . . . and then what? Dan swallowed an evil lump of salty bile.

Suddenly, Billy raised his skeletal hands in front of him, but instead of resuming his inexorable advance, he put his hands to his own face, sinking the ragged nails into his forehead. Thin black liquid spurted over his face as he began to pull downward, worrying at the skin, shagging it down in pieces, pulling it loose in flaps and ribbons that escaped through his fingers. As Dan watched, frozen, the whiteness of bone, glistening with blood and flecked with skin, revealed itself. Billy jerked one more time, and the entire front of the skull was exposed, glowing with a sepulchral light that made the shimmering red streaks into fire-covered rivers coursing through a blasted landscape.

"No!" Dan screamed, thrashing backward at the walls with his fists and shoulder blades. "Stop it!"

As an answer, Billy hurled his handfuls of face at Dan. The pieces slapped at his chest in sloggy heaps, dribbling trails as they slid to the ground. And then Billy and his friends came closer.

Dan whirled around and began punching and kicking at the wall, expecting each second to feel a bony embrace sliding around his throat. One haymaker broke through the bamboo to the freedom beyond, and he immediately began tearing at the rend, mindless of the deep gashes being carved into his hands and arms by the splintering bamboo. As bloody trails flowed past his elbows, the opening became large enough to thrust his torso through. With a backward glance at the gang of corpses, now only inches away, he leaped, screaming in pain as jagged knives of bamboo bit into his skin, opening ragged trenches down the length of his body. But he pushed through, oblivious, letting his shoulders and hands fall forward onto the ground outside, then somersaulting his legs up and over the edge of the breach. For one second, he lay still, sprawled on his back, catching his breath in huge, shuddering quakes. Then, hearing fresh smashing at the barrier he had just escaped, he rose to his feet and ran, not knowing where he was, not caring.

—*Six*—

It's a jungle out here! he thought, an hysterical giggle breaking the rhythmic sound of his own beating feet and heart. He hurtled through dense vegetable growth, luxuriously flowering trees and gracefully hanging vines parting before him as he sped along. For the first time since awakening in the hut, he realized that for—*hours? days?*—he had not known where he was, nor even what type of world he was in. The last rational moment he could recall was finding Ann's and Tokiro's bicycles at the House of Green Gables. Since then, everything was madness, a crazed juxtaposition of landscapes and characters, feelings and thoughts. The eerie silvery light washing over the exotic landscape of red flowers and black-green plants seemed to confirm his suspicions, to be telling him that this was a dream, that all of it could change in an instant to something new and even more dangerous, that Tommy and Danny and the other boys had not been killed, that the woman who had made love to him had not been impaled on Billy's sharp dagger.

But I'm here! his mind screamed. *I'm here and I must do something. Even if it's a dream, I must find a way out. And I must take Ann with me!*

Suddenly he burst from the jungle into an open expanse of lush grass, brightly lit by the moon that still, incredibly, hugged the edge of the treetops, almost close enough to touch. His last running step brought him to the edge of a grassy cliff, and for an instant he teetered forward, arms flailing at the open air before he jerked his hips backward and regained his footing. Directly across the gulf was a wide ribbon of foaming water, hurtling down into a tranquil pool of still water. At its center swam a full reflection of the burgeoning moon, shimmering in a clean, cold fusion of white and deep blue.

But wasn't there something inside the reflection, a dark figure at its very heart? Something moving? Yes: a human form, a mass of floating hair. Vaguely defined legs and arms undulating in the pallid light.

"Ann!" he shouted, fearing she was dead. "Ann!"

In the confused light, a heart-shaped face slowly upturned, circled in a lacy frame of fanning hair.

"Dan." The voice welled up to where he stood, mingling with the babble of rushing water. "I've been so frightened. Please help me."

Without a second's hesitation, he dove headlong, propelled by such adrenaline and fear that his body shot upward several feet and poised for an instant in stop-action before plunging downward, cutting through the pool's surface like a razor. The water, he discovered with a surge of sensuous delight, was warm, soothing, wiping away blood, sweat, semen and the odor of sex that had ended in death. Invigorated, he plummeted deeply into the water before inverting himself and stroking his way upward. When he broke surface, the glorious light was all around him, and Ann was only inches away.

"Ann," he said, reaching out to embrace her. "Thank heaven I found you."

She folded herself against him, encircling his waist underwater with her arms. The face she brought close to his was lovelier than ever, flushed by the thick moonlight into strange beauty. The blueness of her eyes was like irises, the mouth a rich, showered flower.

"Dan," she murmured in the last instant before their mouth met. He kissed her forcefully, thrilled to find new longing rushing through his shoulders

and arms. Despite what had happened in the hut, despite the bizarre battle at the cave, she was here, she was desirable, entirely possible. With the tip of his tongue he touched the joining of her lips, and they willingly parted, drawing his tongue deep inside. With languorous ease, he wrapped one of his strong legs around her lower body, hugging her tightly in the angle of his knee, exerting tender pressure until they were pressed firmly against each other, hanging lightly in the warm water, rocking placidly.

She pulled her face away from his, gently pressing her lips against the blade of his tongue as she withdrew. As his tongue slipped free, he opened his eyes, wanting to see her fully as his hands reached down to grasp the small of her back and to pull her still closer to the stirring ache submerged beneath them.

But the eyes that returned his sleepy gaze were black, not blue. The lips were fat and broad, not possibly Ann's. He pulled away with a cry. It was Tokiro's waist that he held in his arms, Tokiro's body that even now he hungrily urged himself upon below the water. Repulsion overwhelming him, he fought to free himself from her embrace, but what was happening below he could not control. He screamed and wildly threw his head back, arching away from her tightening hold, but in the submerged world below his waist, events pursued their own inexorable logic. As his cry ricocheted around the tropical grotto, he probed his way inside her, then was drawn within so rapidly and deeply that if his body were not consumed by hers entirely he would come apart. The blinding moon saturated his vision, the night world of boys' daydreams rocked eerily around him, and Tokiro's face was suddenly above him, her mouth torn open in a peal of victorious laughter, bearing down upon him for another passionate kiss. She gripped his mouth, and he felt himself sinking, dragged from below by his juncture with the hideous body, driven from above by her suffocating, irresistible kiss. When she broke her hold on his mouth, he sucked frantically for air, but his mouth filled instead with the warm, luxurious water. As it flowed down his throat in a rolling caress, he struggled to keep from inhaling, but at that moment his union with Tokiro reached its peak. Her terrible grip upon him became excruciating, and he gasped, spewing a flurry of tiny bubbles into the blue world. For one final instant, his mouth broke through the water's surface, and he screamed again. But Tokiro pulled, and his mouth filled again with water that swiftly rushed down his windpipe, loading him heavily with weight that pushed his spent body, released by Tokiro, into a lazy downward ellipsis toward the murky bottom of the moonlit pool.

—Epilogue—

At the House of Green Gables, the visitors' parking lot was nearly deserted. Rain had arrived unexpectedly, ending picnics and bicycling and swimming, all the pastimes that bring the army of tourists each season to Prince Edward Island. From the Northumberland Strait, a north wind barreled up and down the coast, making tourists from the south say that it was January in July, while families from Maine and Massachusetts nodded smugly at such ignorance of the cruelties of weather on the northeastern coasts. The island's implacable natives neither marveled at the weather, nor at human naïveté, nor human vanity.

Next to a small pond of muddy rainwater in the graveled lot was parked a low black sports car, canvas roof pulled up. A short distance away, a single bus, Massachusetts plates, stood idling, wipers cranking and windows steamed. Suddenly a boom of thunder rolled through the lonely expanse, just as the driver's window on the bus jerked down a crack, allowing a lighted cigarette butt to sail through and fall on the wet ground. At that moment, the sports car roared into life, sending a cloud of heavy black smoke into the humid air.

"This car is burning oil terribly," Ann said, staring past the sweeping wiper blades into the dismal scene. "I can't wait to be rid of it in Portland."

Next to her sat Tokiro, also watching the steady rain. For the space of many heavy minutes she said nothing in response to Ann's comment. Finally, she cleared her throat and spoke in a deep, almost musical voice.

"Are you sure you feel all right for the trip back? I could travel with you as far as Portland, you know, if you wish."

"No," Ann said tonelessly. "I want to be alone right now, to try and forget what happened as quickly as possible." Then she turned her head to consider her companion; a warmer note crept into her voice. "Besides, you've already done so much for me. I can't ask you to change your plans so drastically."

Two small, collusive smiles brightened the dull car. Tokiro nodding her head silently.

"Do you really think it's right for me just to leave?" Ann asked, looking again at the rain. A new note, one of nervous confusion, crept into her voice. "I mean, if they find his body, they'll probably figure out he was traveling with someone. Won't they start looking for me? And if they find me, won't it look suspicious that I just left on my own?"

"You really needn't worry," Tokiro said slowly. "He died in our land, which lies outside the policemen's logic altogether. They could never prove a connection between us and his death. And if they succeed in locating you, you simply tell them that—" Her words broke off in a small cry as a rain-spattered face pressed itself against the window at her left. Reflexively, she shrank from the sight, while Ann put her hand on her shoulder. Then a look of recognition replaced her shock, and she pulled herself upright.

"You!" she shouted, quickly rolling her window down a few inches. "What on earth do you mean by this? I told you to wait for me in the bus with the girls!"

"Don't I know it?" came the driver's reply, the words slightly slurred. He pushed his wet, bleary face into the open space above the window, baldly eyeing first Tokiro, then Ann.

"I was reading the paper while I was waiting for you, and I came across this. Thought it might interest you and, uh, your *friend*." He nearly spat the final word, then shoved a section of wet newspaper in front of Tokiro's eyes. She took it from him and began to roll up the window.

"You're drunk," she said. "I smell it on your breath. Go back to the bus and wait for me. When we arrive in Boston I shall report this to the managers of the tour organization."

The window's top edge caught him under the chin, but for a moment he held his position, laughing crazily through lips comically compressed.

"Oh, you do that, Miss Tokiro, you just do that. Looks like mebbe I got things to tell people, too!"

“I said go away,” Tokiro shouted, and she viciously slapped her open palm at the beefy face framed in the window. He recoiled, and the window shot up, restoring a hushed quiet broken only by the steady beat of rain. The car’s two occupants silently watched the driver pick his way back to the bus, staggering on tip-toe between ankle-deep puddles.

“Is it about Dan?” Ann asked at length.

“Yes,” Tokiro replied, studying the paper. “But don’t worry about it now. It only says that he’s been found.”

“What about the driver?” Ann asked. “Wasn’t he hinting that he—?”

“That swine!” Tokiro snarled. “Worry even less about him. I’ve decided to take care of him before we reach Boston.”

Again silence fell, during which Ann fidgeted in her seat, obviously eager to be gone. But Tokiro was hunting through a large canvas bag on the floor between her knees, oblivious to her companion’s signals. Eventually, she withdrew from the bag a small box wrapped in a purple silk scarf. She handed it to Ann.

“Here,” she said, “I want you to have this. Open it, then I must go.”

Quickly, Ann removed the wrapping to reveal a carved wooden box with an inlaid ivory cover and an ornate brass clasp.

“It’s lovely,” she said, running her fingers over the decorated sides.

“The box is from my home city in Japan, but that’s only part of the gift. Open it.”

She did so, then removed a single, unfolded sheet of thick paper. It was tinted blue but with yellowed edges. Ann ran her eyes down the unlined page, studied the handwriting slanting acutely to the right. Her lips slowly parted in a sigh.

“Could this be what I think?” she asked. “It’s not possible. It would be worth a fortune.”

“Much more than a fortune,” Tokiro answered. “Forty-nine lines written in her own hand. Never seen or copied by any of the men who seized her papers. You may read all her published poetry, and you will not find it there.”

“To be privy to this,” Ann began, but then broke off in a loud sob. She began asking Tokiro further questions, but the other woman waved her to silence.

“I can’t delay any longer,” she said, gripping the door’s handle. “I shall tell you the manuscript’s history when I write. And the year will pass quickly before we meet again.”

“Yes,” Ann said, transferring her attention from the paper to her friend, leaning slightly across the gear shift. “It will be a busy year.”

Through the rhythmic sweeping of the wipers, blurred by the disappearing and reappearing sheets of rain, the image of their two scarved heads could be seen meeting inside the car. They held still for the space of several repetitions of rain and clearing and rain and clearing, then they parted. The passenger’s door opened and Tokiro emerged. She straightened, then bowed low again, and spoke into the front seat.

“In Amherst, then,” she said, “at Emily Dickinson’s house, this week in May, next year. I can show you then where that manuscript was found. And choose wisely, Ann, the man you bring with you.”

Then the door slammed shut. Tokiro crossed the muddy lot to the waiting bus, her sparse form wrapped in a black mackintosh flapping about her like the

scaly wings of a mythical bird of prey. The bus's door jerked open to admit her, and she stepped inside. A few yards away, the low black car began moving, shooting another cloud of black smoke as it shifted from first to second. Gaining speed, it made a straight line toward the exit, cutting two rainy gullies into the loose gravel.

A Spike in the Head

I

n her grandmother's apartment, she was a submerged fish gulping for air in thick dark water. At the height of an August hot spell, a table fan and an air conditioner whirred away, making two tones of monotonous white noise. Blue curtains were drawn shut against a setting sun that beat directly upon the room's only window. It was only late afternoon, but a brass pole lamp was already alight, pouring bright halogen light onto the mint seafoam carpet. Paula was limp on the soft cushions of her grandmother's sofa, struggling against sinking backward, trying to concentrate on the game show blaring from the television. She squelched the urge to ask her grandmother to turn down the volume.

"Well, that's over," the old woman said. She reached for the remote control and lowered the volume. "Now, when did you say you're going back?"

Paula jerked to attention, yawning. "I don't know yet. I have to visit my father and stepmother again. And I still haven't seen Jim or Lucy and her kids. And I'll be stopping by here every day, of course."

Her grandmother still had her eyes on the television tube, but she smiled at Paula's last words. "I want to have you and your brother and sister all over here together," she said. "Maybe on Tuesday when your cousin Teddy brings over my groceries."

"Oh, I'd love to see Teddy," Paula answered. "It's been so long. Is he still trying to get out of the high school and find a coaching job at a college?"

After a pause: "You on vacation or what?"

Paula hesitated, her mouth open, as her grandmother pressed a button on the arm of her chair that made the seat cushion slowly lift up and tilt forward. Paula watched her rise like an airborne water balloon, her thick, veined legs reaching heavily for the floor. Whorls of air from the fan made her thin, sleeveless duster flutter girlishly around her knees. The dress was decorated with large, aqueous purple flowers.

"Sort of," Paula answered. "I don't have any major deadlines coming up, so it's a good time to let things slide a little. Figure out a few things. Maybe I'll get an idea here for an article of some kind."

"Oh, I liked that one you sent me about hiking in that desert. Where was it again?"

"New Mexico," Paula answered. She tried to concentrate on her grandmother's voice through the churning cooled air.

Her grandmother walked over to the dining table at one end of the living room, teetering slightly from side to side, and began rearranging things that Paula had already straightened after their early dinner.

"Don't tell your father you're goofing off, though. You know how he is about not missing work. He used to push your mother right out the door, right up until she couldn't get out of bed. Not that that kept *him* from retiring before he was sixty. Just like *his* father, Mr. Allen, that way. May he rest in peace."

"Granny," Paula started, watching the woman fiddle with a bowl of silk flowers. But her voice trailed away into silence. Every time she visited her grandmother, she learned something new about her family, about her mother's death when Paula was seven and her mother thirty-one. The tangle of connections between her relations on her father's and mother's sides. Her father's treatment of her mother. But the information came like random bursts of gunfire, scattered across visits separated by month, years. Whenever she saw her grandmother now, she searched for the right question that would make her grandmother disclose something vital about the family, that would bring everything together. But never found the right question. Nettled, she asked about something unimportant that she knew would renew a long, tedious conflict.

"Where'd you get the groovy chair, Gran?"

"Teddy," her grandmother answered, clearing things off the drainboard. "But I told him to take it back. I don't really need the lifter, and the edge of that cushion sticks out too far for me to sit in. Hurts the backs of my knees."

"I wish you'd tell me when you need things," Paula said, following her grandmother into the tiny kitchen. "Just because I don't live close by like Teddy doesn't mean I can't get you things. All you have to do is tell me what you want. I could at least share the cost with Teddy and Jim or whomever."

"Oh, stop, not that again." Her grandmother waved a wooden spoon at her. "Next you'll be saying I always liked Teddy better than you and Lucy and Jim. I told you he's taking it back now, didn't I?"

"But that's not the point, Gran. I want to—"

"Stop, I said. I don't want to argue. Look at the paper and see what's on TV tonight. Did you put your shoes outside the door like I told you, so Helen knows someone's here so she don't come over to watch with me?"

Two hours later, Paula and her grandmother chatted intermittently as they watched the climax of a TV docudrama. A pregnant woman was in a coma and her husband tried to get permission in court to have the baby aborted. Another man, a stranger from a pro-life group who had never met the injured woman or her family before the accident, had petitioned the Supreme Court to gain conservatorship of the woman and keep her pregnant.

"Can you believe it?" Paula asked her grandmother. "Some fanatic can come that close to getting custody of a woman in a coma who he doesn't even *know*? Could that really happen, do you think?"

"Based on a true story," her grandmother nodded. "Says so in the *TV Guide*."

After much suffering, the husband won custody. The abortion was performed and the woman regained consciousness. It was full dark now, but the terrible heat continued, held at bay by the air conditioner Teddy had bought for his grandmother two summers ago. Paula suddenly realized she had been trapped in the small apartment for over six hours. Sitting, watching TV, reading

magazines, washing dishes, eating M & M's and other junk her grandmother kept around for the young kids. She wondered if her grandmother felt as sluggish and swollen as she did. If maybe she felt this way every day, uncomplainingly.

"I'd better get going, Granny," she said, standing up and stretching. "It's late, and I want to call Trent in California when I get back to the motel."

"What's your hurry?" Her grandmother always made the same remark, no matter what time it was when Paula moved to leave or how long she had stayed. Paula never knew how to answer her. She quickly gathered up the dressy clothes she had worn to the apartment, before she changed into shorts and a T-shirt.

"You know," her grandmother said slowly, "that movie reminds me of something." She picked up the remote control and pressed the mute button. Abruptly, voices stopped blasting from the set. The apartment suddenly seemed quiet and cool, a white-lit island safe from the sweltering heat and the darkness outside.

"What's that?" Paula asked. Her voice sounded loud, demanding, in the new quiet.

"It was someone on your father's side, way back in. . . . " She paused, turning her face into the blast of cold air from the machine, thinking. "Seems like it must have been a sister or cousin of your great-grandfather on your father's side, the one who lived long enough for you and Lucy to know. What was the old gentleman's name, again?"

"Larrimer," Paula prompted. "Alden Morris Larrimer. Grandmother Allen's father."

"That's right. Almost married someone in my family." She nodded, musing. "I can't remember the woman's name, but her husband owned a grain store in Clyde. My Uncle Frederick took it over when he died, ran it until it went bankrupt, like everything did Fred got his hands on." She shook her head in disgust, but then her face lit up again. "Loretta! That was her name. Named one of her daughters after herself. Well, she had a whole bunch of kids already when she got pregnant again. Then somebody threw a bag of grain from the loft down to the floor and hit her right square on the head."

"And she went into a coma?" interrupted Paula.

"Lord, no! Woulda took more than a sack of grain to knock out Loretta." She laughed in a loud, nasal hoot. "Tiny, mean-natured woman. Had a head like a bullet, ears plastered right against the sides. Got sacks of grain dumped on her all the time, I wouldn't be surprised, 'cause she was always running around that feed store, trying to get her husband to make more money. She'd squeeze a nickel until it squawked, same as your father and all the other Allens. Wasn't the only way they were pure Scotch." After a low belch, she added "No disrespect to your father's family, of course.

"No, it was a railroad accident got Loretta. She was picking milkweed right by the train tracks. Real vain about her house, you know. Always making these tacky arrangements and setting 'em all over the place. Anyway, she was picking milkweed and a train went by and threw up a big piece of metal that went flying straight into her brain right over her left eye."

"Good heavens," Paula said. "And then she went into a coma?"

Her grandmother nodded, lips pulled into a grim line. "Dropped like a stone. Never moved again. And they never got that piece of metal out of her

head, either, though they did finally get a welder to cut off the end, 'cause it looked just awful once it started to get rusty. Her husband took to oiling it every day so she wouldn't get infected from it. Doctors came from Syracuse and Albany to look her over, and somebody wrote about her in a book. She was still alive when my sister Fanny was killed, and that was 1911. Didn't weigh seventy pounds."

Paula hesitated between asking how Fanny had died—she knew her grandmother had told her once, years ago, but now she couldn't remember the story—and pursuing the coma tragedy.

"What about the baby?" she finally asked, making a mental note to ask about Fanny later.

Her grandmother shook her head this time. "That was the sad part. Loretta went into labor a few days after the spike got her and it looked like the birth would be okay if they took it with a C-section. But not every doctor knew how to do a C-section. Besides, she probably had the baby at home. Anyway, it was dead. I remember because my grandmother went over to the hospital in Weedsport to help with the kids."

"Well," Paula sighed, picking up her purse and looking for the keys to her rented car. "At least there weren't any lawsuits over giving her an abortion. That's what would happen today, probably."

"But that's exactly why the movie made me think of her." Her grandmother stood up smoothly from her chair, suddenly excited. "I was too little to be told what the grown-ups were saying, but me and Fanny spied on my Grandma Walkling one day and heard her telling some of her gossips that Loretta *wanted* to get rid of that baby. If she had another, she would have had to turn her parlor into another bedroom, and she hated that idea. So she was looking for ways to get rid of it. Grandma Walkling said the spike in the head was God's justice."

"She tried to give herself an abortion by ramming a spike into her head?" Paula nearly shouted, somehow swept up in the old woman's excitement. "Come on, Gran. No one could be *that* ignorant, not even way back then."

"I know *that*," the woman sniffed. "Think I'm stupid? What she was doing was trying to kill the baby from the vibrations of the trains when they passed by. There was milkweed all over the place that summer. You couldn't swing a stick without knocking open a dozen pods and filling the air with the snow. So why did Loretta need to go so close to the tracks right when she knew a train was coming through? And she walked there for hours and hours. The spike part was a surprise. So *there*."

"Did women really think that would work back then?" Paula asked, her voice suddenly serious.

"Some women'll try anything, I suppose, if they want it bad enough." Her adamant tone made Paula listen closely. A feature writer's instincts. "Probably some of 'em tried spikes in the head. My sister Sadie knew a woman who drank a whole bottle of gin and jumped into a tub of boiling water. I mean *boiling*. Here, you wait a minute before you rush off in such a hurry even though you're on vacation. Want to get something from my dresser."

She came back holding something in her hands. A stack of plain white typewriter paper, tied together at one corner with a length of fuzzy blue yarn tied in a bow.

“My niece Lou put this together,” she said. “Meant to get it out earlier today but forgot all about it.” She handed it to Paula.

“Oh, a genealogy,” Paula said. “Did Lou do this all by herself?”

“Just about. She got some help from Tommy Lynch, who lives right in town here. He’s the great-great-grandson of one of my father’s cousins. You met him, remember? At the calling hours for my brother Mahlon?”

Paula nodded abstractly, looking at the cover page. In neat handwritten script: “The Duwiger (Däuer) Family. 1823-1931.”

“‘Duwiger?’” Paula asked. “Who were they?”

“That’s my mother’s ancestors. You ought to know that. Lou started with the first one who came to America from Germany and went up through my generation. Now she’s working on the rest of the tree, up to today. Here, sit back down and look at it a second before you leave. What’s the damn hurry?”

Paula did as she was told, distracted by what her grandmother had said. And genealogies had always bored her. Years ago, at a family reunion on her father’s side, two of her aunts had given an informal lecture on all the family information they had dug up during a trip to Scotland. Paula had fallen asleep during the slide show, imagining her aunts rummaging through church records and local libraries, taking rubbings at old cemeteries, ignoring everything in Scotland not connected with the Allens.

But she flipped through the pages dutifully, under her grandmother’s encouraging stare. In a few seconds, she read dozens of names, the dates of births and marriages and deaths. And brief annotations that described momentous events in the family’s history. ‘Killed when a tractor exploded for no reason.’ ‘Disappeared after his mother killed herself. Left children with sister, Augusta Duwiger. Died in Cleveland, 1911.’ ‘Died on her 100th birthday, 1878.’ ‘Never returned from Civil War. Body never found.’

Paula was about to hand it back when she noticed an especially long entry. Under a line reading ‘Gustava Duwiger Classen, m. Randolph Classen,’ seven children’s names were listed. Two names, Ralph and Estelle, were bracketed together, with “twins” written next to them. She scanned through the dates, finding that all but one of the children died at an early age. Another name, Olivia, was followed by ‘Died age fourteen in accident in barn jumping onto horse from hayloft.’

“Did you know these people, Granny?” She held up the page, pointing at the list of dead children. “Gustava Duwiger Classen. You must have been in your teens when she died. See?”

Her grandmother squinted at the page, then screwed up her face.

“Oh, Gussie. Yeah, I knew her. Married to my great-uncle Randolph, my mother’s father’s brother. She lived over in Emerson, right next to the big house the first Duwigers lived in.” She sighed, pushing the book away. “Poor Gussie. All those dead children. Only one grew up was Jonah, and they had to put him away right around the time I was married. Thought everybody was trying to kill him. Started when he was still just little, but got worse and worse after Olivia died. They finally locked him up when it got so bad he wouldn’t sleep unless his mother sat up all night in his room holding a shotgun in her lap. He didn’t die until just a few days before your brother Jim was born, you know. 1954. Still in the mental hospital. Musta been thirty years since I’d seen him, but I attended the funeral. Me and two other people.” She paused, her lips

compressed, a statue. “I’d just gotten home from that funeral and your father called to tell me your mother was in the hospital.”

Paula had never heard of Jonah before. She looked up at her grandmother, who was staring back at her, silent and oddly intent. “These twins,” she continued, tapping her finger on the page. “One died just a couple months after being born, and the other, the girl, about four months later. And look, look.” She knelt down on the floor so her grandmother could see the page. “This one who was killed in this weird accident, Olivia. She died nearly on the same day as the second twin.”

Her grandmother looked at the page, silent for a moment, then turned away and removed her thick eyeglasses. Suddenly she looked very tired. “I remember. I was only a kid, but there was a great to-do about it.”

“But why did this girl jump onto a horse out of a hayloft?” Paula demanded. “What for?”

“It was just a trick she did, can’t you see?” her grandmother answered sharply. “She wanted to be a stunt rider, like her Uncle Jack. He’d gone out to Hollywood. She did that trick all the time, but that day something went wrong and she cracked open her head and broke her back. Took her hours to die. Just terrible. I don’t know the whole story. Fanny and Mahlon and Sadie and I never knew Gussie’s children very well. There was something bad between my father and Gussie’s husband. Never found out what. Maybe it was just that he drank and Pa hated drinkers.”

“But this poor woman,” Paula said. “She lost both twins within a couple months of each other, and then Olivia just a few days after the girl twin. You’d think it would drive her nuts.”

“If it drove anybody nuts, it was Jonah,” her grandmother said flatly. “Gussie was too stupid to go crazy. She just buried one after another and went on cleaning that big house and hunting around for her husband at the beer gardens and flop-houses in Port Byron when he went off on his binges. Then, after Jonah went off his rocker, she pretty much gave up on Randolph. They had to drag Jonah out of the house, Gussie screaming and all. My Ma and Pa was there.

“Look here, now, honey, it’s almost midnight.” She began to rise on the chair cushion, putting one hand on Paula’s shoulder as they came closer to each other. “I want to take out my hearing aid, and you should get back to your motel. It’s late.”

Paula set the genealogy on a table, then walked to the door with one arm around her grandmother’s rounded shoulders. It was twenty years or more since she had first noticed that her grandmother had become shorter than she was, but the strange, unfamiliar feeling struck her anew when she walked this close to the old woman. After Paula’s mother died, the grandmother moved into her son-in-law’s home and took charge of his children. Paula had seen her like a stately mountain, something that would endure forever. That exaggeration had dwindled slowly, eventually replaced by an equally exaggerated concern for her grandmother’s frailty. Whenever she left Granny now, even if it were only for a few hours to run to the grocery store or pharmacy, she couldn’t stop thinking that when she returned she might find her dead. The last time she had left New York State to return to California, she sat in her car and cried for an hour after leaving her grandmother, thinking of the small woman alone in her apartment, probably also crying.

“Bye, honey.” She bent over and kissed her grandmother on the lips. “See you tomorrow. I’ll be over in the afternoon.”

“Maybe then you’ll tell me what’s wrong,” her grandmother said, taking one of Paula’s hands in hers. Her eyes were tinged with red, the blue of her pupils almost translucent.

“There’s nothing wrong, Granny.” She put her free hand on her grandmother’s head, patted it.

“Hey!” As she opened the door, a note fluttered down to the floor.

Paula picked it up and read aloud to her grandmother: ‘Doris. You don’t have to tell your guests to put their shoes outside so I won’t bother you. I know where I’m not wanted. Helen. Call me tomorrow.”

The two women stood in the open doorway. They clutched each other’s hands and shook with stifled laughter, the old hands making shush gestures and jabbing at a door down the hallway.

❖❖❖

The phone was ringing. Paula woke up disoriented, sweaty. She had dreamed of a great expanse of dusty planking, of sunlight slanting through a wooden roof in thick diagonal bars. She shook her head, trying to let go of the image. But for a moment the morning light breaking through the room’s venetian blinds was the same as the light in her dream. The ringing slowly faded, the rattle of the air conditioner dulled. A queer, painful buzzing grew slowly in her ears, filling the entire room until it felt like an electric current waving through her body. She saw a dark figure at the far end of a broad, empty floor. Then a harsh, piercing scream rang through the room. The scream of a horse.

“What?” she cried aloud, jumping upright in the bed. The buzz stopped dead and the phone began ringing again. She groped for it with one hand, knocked the receiver off the cradle. “Huh?” she said, feeling stupid, vaguely frightened. She stared down at the receiver rocking in the bedspread.

“Are you there, Paula? It’s me.”

She picked up the receiver. “I called you last night, Trent. You said you’d be in. Where were you?” She heaved herself up in bed, feeling a first sharp pang of nausea.

“Sorry about that. I had to go to the studio after all. Just got home a few minutes ago and heard your messages.”

She picked up her travel clock, calculating the difference in time zones. “What were you doing at the studio until three in the morning?” she demanded, not caring if she sounded like a shrew.

“Just the usual problems. This new band is nothing but trouble. You want to talk now, or are you still asleep?”

“I’m awake, I’m awake. Almost ready to barf, but awake. Talk fast.”

“You still getting sick every morning?” His voice was solicitous, which always irritated her.

“Uh huh,” she answered. “Sicker than ever. And apparently now also having hallucinations.”

“I’m sorry you’re sick, Paula. I wish you were here so I could take care of you. But have you thought more about what we brought up?”

“I thought *you* were in charge of thinking about that.” She stumbled out of bed, managed to reach the bathroom faucet and pour a glass of water while still holding the phone.

“Look, Paula. We both know this is ultimately your decision, right? I just thought you wanted to know all my feelings about it. And I haven’t changed my mind at all. I still just don’t know if our relationship is ready for a baby now.”

“You have two children, Trent.” She gulped down water, an image appearing before her of the two beautiful daughters Trent had created with his former wife. They would be actresses or models or news anchors. They would stay out of the sun and they would not do drugs. They would look California-young until they died in their late nineties.

“I have no kids, Trent. I’m thirty-two. Maybe I want this baby whether you stay with me or not. And maybe I don’t want it whether you stay or not.”

There was a long pause. She could picture Trent pressing two fingers to his temples, trying to control his frustration.

“Have you thought more about having the tests?” he finally asked, wary but assertive.

“Would you stop haranguing me about those bloody tests?” she yelled. “My doctor hasn’t recommended any tests. I’m healthy as a horse, Trent. I just vomit like Niagara Falls every few hours. Maybe you recall your wife doing that.”

“Listen, Paula, don’t get emotional. I just think it would help us make an informed decision if we know the baby is totally healthy. That it’s all formed properly and things like that. You know. People don’t have to take chances these days.”

“I’m not far enough long for those tests, Trent. And if you want a guarantee that I’m carrying Albert Einstein or a football star around in my womb, then—”

“We could at least find out the gender,” Trent cut in smoothly. “It’s not too early for that, I know.”

“The which?” she asked, holding the receiver away from her face and looking at it. “The what?”

But Trent’s words were lost, muffled by the sound of footsteps on a dust-covered floor of soft wood. Maybe she was dreaming again, shocked back into sleep. The motel walls of French Quarter green were dissolving, opening up to bars of bright sunlight cast on a dusty boarded floor. The droning buzz returned, blocking out the room’s other noises. She smelled hay, the damp odor of large living animals. And far away, behind some large dark objects piled in a corner, a figure moved slightly in the still air. Suddenly she knew what would happen next, and she braced herself against the headboard, digging her heels into the rumpled bed sheets. The horse’s peal scattered the dust on the boards, broke all the light outward in a white explosion. She dropped the phone and put her hands over her ears, gasping for breath, cold sweat flowing down her sides.

“Paula, are you listening to me? What are you doing?”

She wiped sweat from her face with a sheet corner, inhaled deeply, then snatched up the phone again, her stomach heaving. “What’s this about *gender*, Trent? Where the hell did *that* come from?”

“Forget it, forget it,” his voice soothed. “It was just an idea, a factor. I don’t want you—”

“I’m going to throw up now, Trent.”

She slammed the receiver onto the phone and ran into the bathroom, hand clamped over her mouth, pale orange fluid seeping between her fingers.

❖❖❖

Breakfast at a diner. Shopping for new Reeboks. Picking up one prescription for herself and another for Granny. Phoning a magazine editor in Oregon. Waiting in a steamy Chinese restaurant for two take-out dinners, the odors making her swallow hard against rising bile. Paula floated through all the tasks heavy and groggy, half-awake. When she reached her grandmother's apartment at three, she still wanted to fall back into bed. The waking dreams that had broken up her phone call to Trent preoccupied her. She blamed them for making her short-tempered and cross with him.

"Oh, those are spiffy," her grandmother exclaimed. "Red and silver. Helen will be jealous. Remind me to get you the money before you go." She held up one sneaker, rotating it slowly for Paula to see. "Picture me in this."

"I don't want any money," Paula said. "Wait, here's your Motrin." She dug in her bag to find the orange bottle. "But, Granny, I wish you'd have Teddy take you back to that doctor and get you a prescription for something stronger. This stuff is like aspirin, for heaven's sake. If this decreases your back pain a little, something like Darvon would help a lot."

"I don't want to be doped up," her grandmother said. Her face closed up.

"Anything stronger than baby aspirin is dope to you. When Lucy told you she was on Xanex, you acted like she was a junkie. Why do you have to be so stubborn about—"

Her grandmother held up one hand. "I don't want to argue, Paula. The pain don't bother me much. Lots of days I don't feel it at all. Now help me get out the dishes and let's eat. You didn't get egg rolls for me did you? I can't eat anything deep-fried anymore, you know."

After dinner, Paula took out the genealogy and spread it on the table, beneath the overhead lamp. For several minutes, she stood before it, studying, while Granny changed into night clothes. When the grandmother finally sat down, heavily, Paula brought a few pages to her chair.

"Look here, Granny," she began.

"Oh, not Gussie again," her grandmother sighed, leaning back her head and closing her eyes. "Why does she interest you so much?"

"Did you ever really read this?" Paula asked. "It's like a whole tragedy shrunk down into a few lines. Look, the first entry says that the oldest offspring, Regina, dies when she is two, May 1899. After that come Olivia, Jonah, Frances, the twins Ralph and Estelle, and Mary.

"Look," Paula repeated. "Frances, the second dead one was about the same age as Regina when she went. It says she fell down a well five years before the twins were born. Then Ralph died in infancy, with his twin, Estelle, dying just a few months later, and Olivia exactly one week after *that*. Then Mary, the last one. What did Lou mean here, Granny? Look at it: 'Disappeared 1915.'"

"I don't need to read it, Paula. I know what it says. I told Lou what to write. It's a lie and Lou didn't want to write it, but I made her do it. Reminded her how I nursed her mother for over five years after she had her stroke, then she did it quick enough."

Paula turned her head to see her grandmother staring directly at her. The deep blue was hard, glinting, making Paula remember when she was a girl and she would argue with her grandmother about boys, make-up, homework, until they reached a fierce, smoldering standoff.

"Why?" Paula asked. But she was suddenly aware of a new sound in the room, a small but distinct buzz cutting through the air conditioner's roar. The yellow electric light from the halogen lamp suddenly seemed brighter, whiter, like sunlight. She thought she heard a dull thump from toward the door, and she jumped in her chair.

"'Cause Ma and Pa wouldn't want anybody to know what really happened, that's why. Gussie and Randolph were family, after everything."

Her grandmother's voice seemed too loud, but also distant. The light around Paula pulsed whiter and whiter. She strained to follow her grandmother's voice as the light and air and sound in the small room changed into something new.

"It was Randolph made her get rid of Mary. She was Gussie's last one still alive, except for Jonah, and everybody already knew he wasn't all there. Gussie cried and cried and cried and one day she come walking into the store in Emerson wearing just her nightgown. Me and Sadie was there. Those eyes of hers, black like coal, flashing like some crazy animal's. But Randolph didn't care how she carried on. He took what was left of the money Gussie got when her father died and sent Mary off. Sent her baggage and all to some relation of Gussie's in Germany. Going by what he said, he sent her with some man he met at a poker game. Just a baby, she was, still in a cradle." Her grandmother sighed a long raspy exhalation.

"But she never got to where the cousin lived. Randolph wrote to them over and over and over again and even found someone who talked German to call over there, long distance. But she was gone, lost. Nobody ever saw the man again.

"My sister Sadie would've took her!" Granny cried out, digging in the pocket of her white robe for a tissue. "Sadie was married by then and big with her own first baby, but when she heard what Randolph was up to, she wanted to take Mary in. So did her husband. He was a good man. But Randolph wouldn't hear it, he wanted the baby gone. One night he got drunk and told my Pa he was afraid what Gussie might do to it, but Ma and Pa knew he was lying. He just didn't want another baby, 'specially a *girl* baby, after all the others had died and Jonah was losing his mind, writing letters to the courthouse saying someone had killed Olivia and Frances and the baby Estelle and now wanted to kill him. So off Mary went, and nobody ever heard a word about her after she got on that boat with that man."

All around Paula, the buzz droned on, the glaring light of an unearthly noon enveloped her. She felt harshly alert, her body stretched with fine wires, immobile, stunned.

"Maybe Randolph wasn't lying," she heard her own words merging gently into the buzz.

"Huh?" Her grandmother pressed a sodden lump of tissue against her nose and blew loudly. The folds of loose skin on her bare upper arms shook from the force.

"Nothing, nothing," Paula said. Suddenly she was aware of the hunched-over shape of her grandmother, the soft round shoulders rising and falling.

"Oh, Gran, don't cry. I'm sorry." She got up and stood over the woman, wrapping her arms around the stooped shoulders. "I didn't mean to make you upset. Please please don't cry."

As she moved, the buzzing stopped. The light transformed itself back into the bright pool of white on the green carpet. The sense of airy space disappeared, replaced by the enclosure of the rectangular living room. Paula exhaled slowly, rubbing her grandmother's back.

"Oh, I'm all right, now. There." She blew her nose again with one hand, reached up to pat Paula's side with the other. Then she drew herself up in the chair, gently pushing Paula away. "Stupid of me to carry on so. It's just that I haven't thought about all that in so long. Funny, but for a minute it felt like it was just yesterday, like Gussie and Randolph and Ma and Pa were still alive. Maybe I'm the one that's going nuts now, like poor Jonah."

Or maybe I am, Paula thought.

"Come on, honey, let's go over and say hello to Helen. I felt sort of bad about the shoe thing this morning, so I told her we'd stop in for a minute. She's a snoop, but she always brings me back a nice present from Hawaii when she visits her grandson. Except last year it was that awful lamp with all the blue shells. Look at it there in my bedroom! How'm I gonna look at that thing every day till they carry me out of here? You want it?"

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Paula slept fitfully that night, tossed by overlapping dreams with barns, sunlight, floors swept clean, horses, and a slight, vague figure that stayed in the shadows. She woke to fierce buzzings that hurt her ears, then the telephone rang loudly until Trent finally gave up. She woke up early and got out of bed at once, not wanting a repeat of yesterday's borderland between dreams and waking. From a pay phone outside the motel office, wrapped up in a trench coat over her underwear, she dialed Lou at her farm outside Port Byron. Lou cried efficiently when she recognized Paula's voice, Paul struggle to keep her voice even, Yes, everything was fine, the writing was going well. Yes, California was beautiful, a different world from upstate New York.

"Good, good, how lovely," Lou would reply, her accent so sharp it made Paula think of Empire State apples. But when Paula casually asked if the house Gustava and Randolph Classen had lived in was still standing in Emerson, and how she could get there, there was a long pause on the other end of the line.

"It's been empty since the last tenants moved out," Lou finally answered. "That must be five years ago now. But it was still standing when I was down there working on the family history. Someone in the family still owns it, but they been trying to sell it for ages."

"Could you give me directions over the phone?" Paula asked. "Is it hard to find?"

Another long pause. When Lou spoke again, she sounded troubled. "Why do you want to go there, Paula? It's way, way off the highway and there's nothing around those two old farmsteads these days, 'cept one new farm that was just barely working when I was there. Emerson ain't even on the map anymore. Does Aunt Irma know you want to go out there?"

Over an hour later, Paula was driving slowly down a rural county road, hunting and pecking for landmarks Lou had described to her. Hills rolled away

from the road, divided into checkerboards by plots of green woods and yellow wheat. Ramshackle barns next to gaunt, unpainted houses. The rank ammonia smell of cow farms filtering through the car's air conditioning. All of it reminded her of driving to the homes of distant relatives on her father's side, before her father had remarried. Every weekend there was somewhere else to go, some obscure country place outside Weedsport or King Ferry or Cato where unknown aunts and uncles lived, people she saw once and never saw again. When her paternal grandparents had died, the visiting had stopped abruptly. Then her father had remarried, and Granny had moved away to live with her son and his family, until she took an apartment of her own. Paula left behind the country roads of upstate New York, tied to them still only through her grandmother.

She saw an abandoned octagon house with a wrap-around porch and pressed the brake, consulting her notes. 'Two/three miles past octagon house, left fork onto dirt road. Old Duwiger Road. No sign.'

The dirt road was as rough as Lou had warned her. As she bumped down it, steering wheel gripped hard, she laid her hand across her stomach, feeling a low, slight swell for the first time. She wondered what Trent would say. The first farm was a low, modern building almost hidden behind a maze of derelict tractors and cars. From a sagging porch with a broken railing, a group of small children wearing only cut-off shorts solemnly watched her drive by.

'G.'s house a mile past the new place. Original Duwiger home beyond that.'

The house was smaller than she expected, but in better shape. Two stories of red brick with a steep roof that had stepped walls and narrow chimney stacks at both ends. It sat far back from the road, surrounded by a mass of overgrown lawn with weeds flowering nearly to Paula's head. She parked the car in the middle of the road, assuming that no one else would want to pass.

"Hello?" she called, wading a few feet into the junglish grass. She could find no path through the overgrowth and the house seemed miles away, as protected from her perverse curiosity as a medieval fortress behind a moat. Frustrated, she gazed at the darkened windows, feeling weak and breathless in the intense heat after hours in the car's cold air. Far out on the lawn, in a spot where the shaggy vegetation seemed to thin out, a lawn ornament stood upright and intact. The pedestal was a white concrete cone, decorated like a wedding cake with braiding and medallions. At the top sat a reflecting sphere of bottle green. Paula stared at it, narrowing her eyes against the green and silver beams that shot away from it. She remembered a similar one in her paternal grandmother's front lawn, but with a silver ball. A 'sun ball,' her Grandmother Allen had called it.

You'd never see anything like that in California, she thought.

She shaded her eyes, scanning past the explosive green. At the lawn's distant edge, some type of shed had buckled in on itself, the four walls slanting inward until they touched at the top. Fallen roof boards lay loose and scattered on the ground. But the big barn—the barn where Olivia had missed her horse and broken her back—had outlasted the years. Paula peered hard, imagining what was behind the broad side wall that faced her. In the center was a double sliding door as high as two men. Each door was criss-crossed by two rough planks, one of them loose at the top and swinging gently forward. Green geometry still flashing before her eyes, she began walking down the road

toward the barn. With each step, the heat grew stronger and the sunlight brighter, filling her ears with a buzzing wail. But she wanted to get closer, to see if she could take a look inside.

You've come all this way. Might as well try.

When she reached the barn, she discovered a gap between the doors just wide enough to slip through. But first she peered inside, twisting her head carefully around a jagged piece of wood. Inside the barn, she saw only empty space in near-dark. One end seemed slightly brighter. Perhaps there was a window down there. She pulled her head back into the daylight, suddenly cold underneath a layer of perspiration. Down the road, her car looked miniature. She wished it were only a few feet away, so that she could get in it right this second and drive away, defeat the impulse to enter the barn. She shook her head against the stinging buzz, which had grown so loud it felt like needles stabbing at her ears. Leaning her back against the barn door and exhaling heavily, her line of vision was drawn to the green sun ball. She tried to turn away, but the brilliance froze her gaze, fusing with the ceaseless buzz inside her head. Overhead, the sun was a white burning disc. But wasn't there something else, something also white, or was it just a trick of the light? Through the green rays, outside the house, above the lawn, a blur of white, like a curl of fog caught in the headlights of a car. It seemed to move away from the house, mingling for an instant with the shimmering green. Then it was closer. Drifting toward the barn.

Watching, she had sunk to her knees in the smooth dirt. In another second, not thinking, not looking back, she eased her heavy body through the gap between the doors. As she slipped across the boundary separating daylight from dark, a shudder rolled through her body, emanating from her stomach and ending in her droning, buzzing head. She dragged herself a few inches away from the vertical line of light and put her back against the solid door, closing her eyes, not wanting to see any more of Gussie's house or barn. For several long seconds she remained still, trying to calm her breathing, sucking the barn's cooler air in deep gulps. But the texture of the air around her seemed to change. Coolness dissipated until she felt again as though sunlight were beating down on her. There was a soothing smell of dusty, bare wood, but also an odor rank and damp.

When she opened her eyes, the barn's darkness had fled. Wide, sweeping reaches of empty space now were washed with grey light striped by bright rays at intersecting angles She was dwarfed by the high walls, alone on the clean, swept floors that stretched away from her in all directions. There was a dry, tasteless odor of hay and grain, but underneath it, something sweet and spicy. *Molasses*, she thought, fighting through the daze of sensations. *Sweet fee*d*. For horses who won't eat dry oats*. She remembered it from a summer when she and Lucy lived on an uncle's farm. All summer long, thick droves of flies hovered around the covered barrels. And she smelled something alive, something wet with sweat. Slowly, she slid herself upright, her back pressed against the door. Directly opposite, a set of crude wooden steps ascended to the loft that encircled the barn on three sides. She looked up, straining her eyes. Was there something white up there, back in the loft's far recesses? Behind a shaft of milky light dancing with flecks of chaff and dust? Again she wanted to leave, to run headlong back to the car, and she began to edge along the wall back to the narrow aperture. But a single, hard stomp on the planked floor

made her freeze. It echoed through the vault, blending with the deafening buzz. The white stain on the air was drifting closer to the edge, dissolving through the column of light. Paula wiped one grimy hand against the sweaty film covering her eyes, not wanting to see, but compelled. The vague shimmer seemed to gather substance as it swept forward. Near the top of it, where it dissipated into the light, she saw two floating circles of hard, gleaming black.

She wrenched herself away with such force a new wave of pain shot through her stomach. She banged her fists against the door, suddenly knowing what would happen. The stomping had increased to a rapid, clumsy patter, like a horse frantically trying to find its footing on a shaking platform. Paula stared wide-eyed into the blank barn door, but the two circles of black still seemed to hang before her eyes, moving to the very edge of the hayloft. Slowly, two strands of white separated from the blur, like ragdoll arms reaching forward, poising for one instant. Then they pushed at something standing on the edge.

Paula forced herself between the doors, feeling as though she were falling, flying, through the gulf to the barn floor far below. Her blouse caught on a long splinter of wood, but she pulled at it violently, afraid of what she would hear next, a dull, massive thump and a horse's cry. Her blouse ripped from the shoulder to the elbow and she was free, stumbling away from the barn, falling to one knee but plunging forward. Then she broke into a run, heedless of the beating sun, focused on the car down the road. When she reached the door, she threw herself in, started the car with a roar and pulled away from the house in a spray of red dust without looking back at the barn.

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"Why'd you go up to Emerson yesterday?" Her grandmother pulled back from Paula's kiss. She sounded angry, defiant.

"What?" Paula was startled. "How did you know? I was going to tell you today."

"Lou said you wanted to know which house was Gussie's. How come?"

Paula turned away and walked into the living room, throwing her gym bag on the sofa. Her grandmother followed behind, bent at the knees and more hunched over than Paula remembered her.

"I just wanted to look around, Gran. I thought I might get some ideas for a magazine feature. You know, writer's stuff."

Her grandmother crossed the floor to stand directly before Paula. "I don't want you going up to Gussie's house again. You understand me, now?" Paula tried to turn away, but her grandmother gripped her left arm and jerked down on it. "Now, you listen to me, Paula!"

Paula looked down into her grandmother's face. Long violet blotches stood out on her forehead and cheeks. Her eyes were rimmed with moist red.

"Okay, okay," Paula answered, pulling her arm free, feeling like a bad girl again. "Why are you so mad? All I did was walk around the place, look into some windows."

"You didn't go inside the house, then?" She sounded only anxious now, not angry. "Or in the barn?"

"Hell, no," Paula lied. "I couldn't even get close to the house, the weeds were so high. Why?"

Her grandmother collapsed heavily into the electric chair. She looked exhausted. And old. “I didn’t tell you this before, Paula, because there wasn’t no reason to.” She spoke slowly, licking her lips. “Your grandfather Frank and me lived in that house for a while after he got back from the war. We were poor then, and one of my aunts who owned part of Gussie’s old house let us stay there for free. We thought we were lucky.”

“And what happened?” Paula asked, trying not to think of the light and noises inside Gussie’s barn.

“After a few weeks, we had to move out. Frank said I was crazy, that it was all in my head ’cause I was pregnant with your mother then. But he was wrong. All night long I heard noises all through that house, sometimes even in the day, and banging and such from that empty barn so you’d think there was still horses and cows there. Got to the point where I couldn’t sleep one wink the whole blessed night. But there was something more, too, something I never even told Frank. I got pains in my stomach the first night we slept in that house. Not real bad ones, but they got worse, sometimes. Then they’d go away for a while. Maybe Frank was right and I wasn’t thinking straight ’cause of the baby, but I got the idea that something about the house was givin’ me the pains, and then I knew we had to get out. I’d already had two born dead, you know. Makes me shiver now just to think of it, after all these years.”

“Did you ever *see* anything strange?” Paula asked. She knew she sounded too eager.

“What’s that?” Distracted, absorbed in memories, looking out the window from her chair. “See things? No, never saw nothing peculiar. But I finally told Frank I was leaving whether he came with me or not. And we moved out that day. Never went back.”

Paula nodded, thinking of Gussie’s dead children. Except for Ralph, the first twin to die, all of them were girls. Now she knew, with certainty, even if the truth were buried forever by almost a century of life and birth and death, that Gussie had not killed Ralph, just as she never killed Jonah, even after he started telling people someone had killed all his sisters. Had Jonah thought his father was the guilty one, the same way her grandmother’s mother and father thought Randolph had shipped Mary off to Germany because of his own greed? She looked at her grandmother, who had fallen silent, staring out the window. Was it possible she had never suspected the truth, or did she have some reason for protecting Gussie? Her grandmother had given birth to five children, all of them stillborn or dead in infancy except Paula’s mother and Teddy’s father. Years ago, she had told Lucy that if she hadn’t been able to give Frank a healthy son, she would have wanted to die.

“Granny.” Paula spoke softly. She extended one arm across the narrow space separating the sofa from her grandmother’s chair. She laid one hand on her grandmother’s white, bare arm. “Granny,” she said more loudly. “Did you ever think . . . ever wonder if maybe Randolph had a reason to think Gussie might hurt the last daughter?”

“No.” She was cold, exact. She didn’t turn to look at Paula. “Why would I?”

“Because maybe Gussie . . .”

Paula’s voice trailed off. She looked at her grandmother’s face. The harsh sunlight from the window fell cruelly on her wrinkles, the sagging flesh, the dark oval mole under her ear. But in the line of her jaw, the rims of bone

around her blue eyes, she was still the rock that she and Lucy and Jim had clung to when their mother died. The rod of just punishment, the fountain of sudden, rushing affection.

"Because maybe Gussie had something to do . . . that she played a part in the deaths of her daughters?" She rushed the words out, breathless.

Still gazing through the window, her eyes fixed on something very distant, her grandmother answered. "Why, no, Paula," she said. "I never thought that at all." She turned slowly from the window to look at her granddaughter. For a moment, the two women searched each other's eyes. The grandmother's face was calm, her thin lips pressed together and slightly lifted at the corners.

"Oh, no," her grandmother said, half-rising from her chair. "There's Jim and Lucy, down in the parking lot. Early, for once. And Teddy right behind them. How'm I gonna fit everybody in this place?" She pulled herself up by the window sill, began waving at the group below her, the overlay of old age lifted.

"Yeek!" she yelped. "Lucy's twins, too. I thought they were with her in-laws." She turned away from the window, dragging Paula up from the sofa by one arm. "Quick, take the big carnival china bowl off the sideboard and put it in the bucket on the floor of my bathroom closet. Careful with it! Quick, like a bunny! Close the closet door tight."

She gave Paula a shove, then hustled herself into the kitchen. Paula heard her rapidly opening cupboards and drawers.

"Granny," Paula called to her from the bathroom as she hid the bowl. "Lucy's twins can't reach the top of that sideboard. They can't even walk yet."

"It's not the twins, not the twins," her grandmother shot back, making several fast zigzags through the living-room, kitchen, and bedroom as she prepared the place. "It's Lucy. She sees that bowl and she goes all google-eyed, just like your great-aunt Oll used to do when she saw something she wanted. She collects glass and china, you know, and it would look *soooo* good in the center of her big china closet with the glass doors."

Paula straightened up from the floor with some difficulty, putting one hand on her lower back. "You told her years ago that the bowl goes to her in your will, anyway, so what's the problem? Please stop rushing."

Her grandmother's head popped around the corner, her face beaded with perspiration, tendrils of snow-white hair escaping her smooth helmet of a perm like wisps of cloud breaking away from a huge billow.

"She wants it *now*, of course, silly!" The head popped away again.

"Hey, Gran!" she shouted. "Give her the Hawaii lamp to hold her over!"

They were ringing from downstairs, and Paula heard her grandmother shouting at top volume through the intercom to the three people waiting below, as though they were the deaf ones.

For the next hour, her grandmother's apartment whirred with greetings, bursts of conversation with quick questions and answers, swells of laughter. Teddy brought in beer, Lucy and Jim a bag of fish sandwiches and potato salad. Everyone took turns pushing their grandmother back into her chair, telling her to stop fetching silverware, dishes, glasses.

"Where's the bowl?" Lucy whispered to Paula at one point, holding up one baby so her grandmother couldn't see her face.

"What's that, Lucy?" her grandmother asked sharply, trying to peer around the baby.

“Bathroom closet,” Paula whispered back. “Let me hold one of the twins.”

“Nothing, honey!” Lucy called. Then, to Paula: “Here, take Doris. She’s sick of me.”

“Hey, Gran!” Paula yelled, competing with the din. “Teddy and Amy’s baby will make you a great-great-grandmother. How do you feel about that?”

“Oh, stop,” said her grandmother, waving one hand helplessly in the air. “Don’t seven great-grandchildren make me old enough? You tryin’ to push me into my grave?” She shot a quick, suspicious look at Lucy. Her grandchildren all shouted in protest, but Paula waved them into silence.

“Then how would you feel about one more plain old great-grandchild, Gran, after Amy’s baby has made you into a phenomenon? Good or bad?”

Abruptly, there was silence. Lucy, Jim, and Teddy looked first at Paula, who was wiping white foam from the baby’s face and her blouse, then at their grandmother, who seemed confused.

“Eight?” she said. “But who? Lucy—?” Then her face lit up, and she almost leaped from her chair. “You mean *you*, honey? You’re gonna have your first? At last?” She spread her arms wide. “Land, you sure waited ’til you’re plenty old enough!” She embraced Paula and the baby together, squeezing hard, then went back to her chair and immediately began wiping at her nose with a tissue.

“Good work, Paula,” Teddy shouted, jostling with Jim to hug her. “Do you want a boy or a girl?”

“Yes!” Paula shouted as Jim lifted her off the sofa and spun her around the room.

They all laughed, except their grandmother, who was still sobbing and wiping her nose. “What’s the joke?” she demanded, looking from one face to another as she sniffled loudly. “What’s so funny?”

So they all began explaining it to her at once.

Della's Motivation

—One—

You look something like one, now that I think about it. About it. Think. Like one." Words from her conversation with Neill yesterday wheeled through her groggy mind, disjointed syllables and inflections upsiding themselves, cartwheeling into her mind, then spinning away again, back into fading dream terrain. One nuance in Neill's discourse, one snotty little lift on a concluding vowel or a waspish dragging on an initial 's' got stuck in her senses, repeated, elongated, began to modulate, relentlessly droned. Bam. One hand hit the alarm button as the other pushed back the champagne-colored comforter she had just received from The Company Store.

"Anything for another hour," she muttered, dragging herself heavily from the bed. "Anything."

She glanced at the inert form tunneled under the comforter on the other side of the bed. "You said you'd get up with me today. I'm up."

An expressive "unnhnnu" filtered up through the baffles of platinum white goose down.

"Thanks," she said with dispirited sarcasm and walked out of the room. But the sight of her living room floor nearly sent her back to bed. It hadn't seemed like quite this much a mess when she went to bed at 2 AM. Spread sheets, graphic layouts, and pages of yellow legal paper were spread about in horizontal layers of chaos, waiting silently for arranging, folding, and collating. I'll never be ready by nine, she thought, side-stepping a pile of pens and rulers on her way to the bathroom.

An hour later, she was showered, her hair was done, and the final version of the report had been salvaged from the refuse in the living room and settled neatly into her metal attaché case. All that was left was the make-up and dressing, the parts she always dreaded most. It was bad enough on ordinary days when she only faced her co-workers and perhaps a higher-up or two, but the prospect of seeing clients always brought her latent paranoia about her appearance surging to the surface. Today would be particularly awful because the gossipy information that her secretary had dug up on her clients indicated that a complete make-up job was in order. Grimly, she began smearing "Fawn Taupe" foundation across her face and down her throat, finding that it refused to be evened out and muted into acceptable shades of female-executive seriousness. Totally displeased with the effect, she jabbed five dots of blush on her face in strategic places, aiming for the 'sun-kissed' look currently in vogue.

Still grumpy, she rushed through lipstick shades: too pink, too brown, the third so understated that the more she put on the more her lips looked broad, puffed, and naked.

"Why don't we just give up and wear complete masks?" she snarled, throwing the stick into the bathtub.

Still another hour later, more exhausted from her efforts than pleased with the results, she gave her face a matte finish with cornsilk powder, swept some more across her breasts and under her armpits, called it quits. Turning away from the reflection that stubbornly refused to reveal prominent cheekbones, she quietly locked the bathroom door, then stood beside it, listening for a second, before opening the doors of a linen cupboard and reaching far into the back. With a furtive glance toward the bathtub, as though someone might have been hiding there all this time, she withdrew the secret cache, a very old-fashioned, very tight, very constricting Maidenform girdle. She remembered seeing the type on her mother and grandmother. Keeping her eyes off the mirror, she began massaging her body into the restrainer, swearing that this was the last time she put herself through such humiliation. By her personal standards, the twenty or so pounds of excess weight that she could never quite manage to lose bothered her very little, but several times in the past year she had detected faint shadows of disapproval clouding the eyes of new clients—reflections, she was convinced, of the modern revulsion for fat, regardless of how neat and healthy a person might otherwise look. Feeling compelled by forces beyond her control, admitting that her body fat was too much for mere Spanx garments, she had finally relinquished her self-respect and gone girdle-hunting, disguised in dark glasses and a scarf.

"Goodness, but my stays are tight." Scarlett O'Hara had said that as she raced down Peachtree Street to find Doctor Meade when Melanie was about to give birth. Della gave one last ferocious tug at the antique garment, then suddenly burst into laughter at the thought of her own abasement.

"Phoomph." She tried to exhale, leaning against the sink. Inhaling was worse and for a moment she thought she was fainting. Eventually, however, her mirror image came back into focus, staring back at her with a newly stupid expression that made Della worry that all this molding of body fat might have somehow weakened her brain. "I wouldn't be surprised," she said. "Who else would go through all this shit but brain-drained women? Other than me, that is?" She slid into her robe and tried to hurry back to the bedroom, feeling that with every step some part of her body was chafing against a man-made constraint. In her room, throwing a quick glance at the bed to ascertain that the sleeping lump was still well under the covers, she quietly dove into a mauve silk blouse, then stepped into a knee-length white linen pleated skirt.

"Get *up*," she said, turning to face the bed. "I'm all set to leave."

Slowly, the large oval under the comforter began to elongate. Legs took form. A hand protruded from under the sheets.

"You get up so damn early, Della," a voice rasped. "It's unnatural. Come back to bed for an hour."

"Sure, I'll jump right in after only two hours of putting myself together. Look at me! Critique me! This is a very important day!"

The top of the sheet moved down to reveal sleep-filled blue eyes. After a long silence, the rasp finally spoke. "Is mauve a power color?"

—Two—

"You *must* jump." Neill was shouting directly into her ear, his voice thundering above the deafening roar of wind that blasted in through the fuselage door. "It'll go on the report if you don't."

"You must be out of your mind!" Della screamed back, tendrils of hair escaping from her helmet, whipping her eyes. "There is no way I am jumping out of a fucking *plane*, Neill. Take your hands off me!"

"Everybody in our group is jumping, Della," Neill shouted. "It's expected of us, because we have the experience." He was trying to unwrap her hands, finger by finger, from the edges of the door.

"I have no experience in skydiving, you idiot! Where would anyone get that idea?" Finishing her words, she clamped her teeth hard onto Neill's right hand.

"Stop acting like a child," he yelped, thumping her on the helmet with one hand and sucking away drops of blood from the other. "I think they might have gotten the idea from me." There was a pause; they exchanged a long, even gaze. "I think I might have put it down on a form I filled out for you. You were so busy, I didn't want to bother you."

"Neill!" Della threw her head back and howled his name, banging her heels on the floor, wanting to kill him on the spot. "You lying idiot! Now you expect me to jump out of this plane just to cover your ass? Forget it!"

Neill leaned in close to her face; she could see his face twisting with anger.

"Listen, Della, this isn't a vacation at a yuppie fat farm. You wanted to be in the primary group, didn't you, just like I did? Well, that required a bit of creative writing on the information forms. So now we're off to a great start, but if you don't go through with this jump, you'll ruin everything."

"I don't care!" Della wailed, slumping onto the floor and wrapping both arms and legs around anything upright and solid. "Put me in the remedial group! You can't expect me just to jump out of a plane with no training. Are you crazy?"

"Come on," Neill said, beginning to pull at her arms again. "It costs the corporation thousands of dollars for every exec who comes up here. Quit before you're even there and your head will be on the carpet when we get back to New York next week. And they won't give a damn about who lied on the forms."

Momentarily, Della hesitated in her self-defense, reluctantly staring at the yawning blue space inches to her left. As she and Neill argued, the small plane had been making tight circles, giving her an acute case of nausea.

"Don't be such a gutless tub of lard," Neill hissed. "I'll get you down safely. This is my tenth jump. There's really nothing to it. You certainly have everything you need to free fall well." He poked her stomach. "And more than enough fat to survive a belly landing."

Dazed, she allowed herself to be moved an inch from the spot where she had retreated when Neill had first thrown open the door and shouted gleefully "This is where we get out!" After that, it had been only minutes before he had strapped her, numb with sudden terror, into a chute. Caught off-guard, she had dumbly let him slam a helmet on her head, then manipulate her arms and legs and hands through the harness—taking special care, she noticed, with the wide leather straps that went beneath her crotch.

Suddenly she was standing at the very edge of the door. *Hatch? Porthole?* she thought hysterically. Was she really going to jump? Was any account that important to her? Neill reversed tactics, changing from a hostile drill sergeant into a cooing, supportive coach. She heard his directions in pieces, the wind or her fear keeping her from putting them together into sentences: "my hands during freefall . . . pull here . . . like you expect a mattress . . . firmly to steer right . . . landing pad right next to a steep cliff. . . ."

"No!" she finally shouted. To hell with PharmaSynergy! But Neill was already tensing his body for the jump, staring off into the sky with a John Wayne sort of expression that absurdly touched some maternal instinct buried inside her. She almost wanted to wish him luck. But when she saw him fall forward, she saw her own arm lifting, she saw his hand clamped around her wrist, she felt herself being pulled. She screamed. It was almost as though she were not moving. Neill was flying beside her, still attached to her by her viselike grip. Fighting against the torrent of air, she flung her other arm forward to grasp Neill's left arm just above the elbow. She decided quickly she would never look down and never let go of Neill. What was he trying to say to her?

"You're breaking my arms," he spat, his face purple. "Lighten up!"

She squeezed harder.

"We pull the ripcords now, Della. Let go or our chutes will tangle!"

With a grunt, he broke one arm free of her death grip, then used it to knock away her hold on his other arm. Instantly, he began to move away from her, his legs ridiculously bobbing above his head. As the distance widened, she saw his mouth opening and closing, as though he were shouting. His hand closed around a handle protruding from the front of his vest. He shook the handle at her, his mouth still moving.

"Pull, pull!" She heard the words as though in a dream. And then Neill's chute opened far above him, a giant flag, a nylon house constructing itself in dramatic swooshes and creases for what seemed minutes. As she watched, Neill shot upward, receding rapidly into the sky.

Against her will she looked down. The green earth below was benign, quiet, and blissfully remote. "Pull, pull!" Now she was saying it herself. Pull what? Pull the cord! She was falling like a stone toward earth. That bastard Neill. Where did he say the cord was? Where had it been on his chute? She groped frantically, expecting her feet to make contact with flesh-splattering rock at any moment. She didn't have one! He had given her a chute with no cord! But at last her hand closed around the hard plastic of the handle. She yanked. Had he told her not to yank, to pull firmly? Was anything happening above her? Yes, like a miracle, the chute unfurled in vivid red and yellow. Everything would be fine now, she told herself. She was bobbing in the harness's strong webbing. The malevolent face of earth ceased its warp speed toward her.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for you." Those words from Neill had started her on the irreversible track leading to this horror. The senior partners had offered her a week at their BMF, the Behavioral Motivation Facility, in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The brochures they sent her made it sound irresistible: ocean views from mountain cliffs, virgin forest, whale-watching from the shore. But the motivation part had soured her appetite for a free vacation. For a long time, through the office grapevine, she had been hearing about the goings-on at

these camps. She had even seen a few news shows about them. They were based upon models developed years ago in Japan, but they incorporated techniques from western survivalist training, military boot camps, and, Della half-suspected, white supremacist rallies. The basic goal was to enhance the leadership and decision-making powers of promising junior management types by subjecting them to assorted physical and psychological trials. Della had heard some details of these tests and she suspected that they wouldn't agree with her body. So she had decided not to play along with her superiors' ideas—all men—of building strong minds and bodies. But Neill had coaxed and bullied her into relenting. According to him, execs always got their first invitations when they were being considered for a major advance. And the word was out that Della was up for leading the consultant team to Open PharmaSynergy, the corporation's newest and wealthiest client.

"You can kiss *that* chance good-bye if you crap out on the BMF," Neill had hissed into her ear one day in the elevator, just before tweaking her left buttock. So now she was falling toward this damned BMF like a barrel of concrete, wondering if one needed to do anything special to land. She also wondered if Neill, whom she had lost track of, had beaten her to the ground. She swung her head 360 degrees, then looked down. She felt her heart arrest. Below her surged the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. Far off to her right was land, a dismal stretch of beach below a towering mountain.

"Damn you to hell, Neill!" she screamed as icy water began to flood over the top of her hiking boots.

—Three—

The line for breakfast was moving slowly. Behind her, Neill was repeatedly bumping his tray into her butt. Apparently, he perceived these jolts as conciliatory. "Come on, Della," he wheedled. "I *told* you you'd have to buck that off-shore breeze in order to hit the pad."

"You did *not* tell me," Della hissed through clenched teeth, looking straight ahead, vaguely thinking that maybe he had touched on that point in the screamed instructions that she had barely heard.

"I had the chopper there in seconds, for crying out loud. And the incident will probably look good on your report." His voice lowered and took on a dark tone. "Except for the part where you kneed me and tried to push me out of the chopper. You've got to watch that temper, Della. We're motivation partners, remember." Della's grimace relaxed into a bemused smile as she recalled the sound her knee had made meeting Neill's groin. His mouth had looked something like a frog's as he doubled over, gasping for breath, saliva looping from his mouth.

After breakfast began the serious work. For the entire day, the campers were run through a battery of written and performance tests that sought out their weaknesses and strengths. Della was astonished by the questions, which covered everything from favorite classical folk guitarists to details about every sexual partner she had ever known. She did a good deal of creative answering for the lover questions, uncertain about who had access to the test results. The performative part was worse. After receiving a complete physical, she did calisthenics, ran an obstacle course, swam ten laps in an olympic-size pool. Doggedly, she kept pace with the others, all the time fearing that they were

whispering about her excess weight. She quailed at what might be in store for her and Neill on the following day, especially when she recalled a magazine story about a female exec who had drowned while whitewater rafting at a BMF in Montana. But when she and the other campers trooped into the cafeteria for dinner, she felt some pride in having made it through her first day.

That night, after dinner, she checked out a jeep and drove into the nearest town, just on the edge of Cape Breton National Park. After the military-style environment of the camp, she was surprised to discover a picturesque community clinging to the very side of a mountain, a place that reminded her of hamlets she had seen in northern Scotland years earlier. A maze of flower-edged sidewalks crisscrossed the village, creating gay, spidery lattices on the steep grassy banks surrounding the town. Strolling past a church—Scottish Presbyterian, of course—she saw a small shop. In a hand-painted, faux-medieval script, the sign above the door said "MacCavendish's Gaelic Folk Arts." Below, in smaller letters: "Herbal Remedies. Gaelic Language Instruction. Highland Dancing." She tried the door, found it locked. For a moment, she surveyed the goods in the display window: photographs of people in Scottish regalia, dancing; glass jars and bottles filled with unidentifiable plants and herbs and liquids; a bagpipe, complete with tassels and gold braid, suspended by wires to hover at eye level.

"What can I do to help you?"

Della started. She hadn't heard the door open. Next to her stood a tall, broad-shouldered man with a full auburn beard. His plaid flannel shirt was in the pattern of the Black Watch tartan, open at the throat; red braces were clipped to his tight jeans. The dark blue eyes—almost cobalt, Della thought—were surrounded by very fine lines that spread gently upward toward his temples. A questioning expression flickered there.

"I . . . I was just looking," Della replied. "This is such a charming shop."

"Come in," he said, opening the door wider. "Have some tea. My mother's just lighting the stove. Please."

Behind him, in the dimly-lit interior, Della saw tables holding the store's wares, tapestries hanging on the walls, heavily-laden bookshelves. Toward the back, a kerosene lamp was burning on a low, round table covered with a fringed shawl. "I really can't," she said hesitantly. "I'm due back at the camp by nine. The Motivational Facility, I mean." The man's eyebrows lifted, making the words sound even more ridiculous and out of context. "That's where I'm staying," she lamely tried to explain. "I'm here with a crew of business people from New York." Her voice trailed off as she felt the absurdity of explaining to this local shopkeeper the BMF's reason for existing.

"Oh, I know what the camp is for," he replied, still smiling, just enough to reveal very white teeth. Perfectly even and small, the contrast they caused with his rugged physique made Della feel a sharp desire to stay and talk with him. "But surely there's time enough for a cup of tea?"

Why not? Della asked herself. The image of normalcy presented by the shop attracted her. She was certain that this husky Scotian and his mother—an aged woman, Della felt sure, with snowy hair and homely, sensible shoes, the very mother from *How Green Was My Valley*, even though that was another brand of Celticism—would not be anything like Neill, nor any of the other campers. She returned the man's smile, then stepped inside the door.

—Four—

"Shit, I'm going to fall." For once, Neill didn't sound sarcastic. Directly above Della, he was clinging to a fifty-foot climbing wall studded with finger- and toe-holds.

"Reach, Neill," Della grunted, terrified herself, clutching at her holds like they were diamonds, one leg sidling along the wall, searching for a new purchase. "You've got to keep moving, Neill, or I'll fall."

"I can't," he gasped. "There's nothing else to hold onto up here."

Della hoisted herself several inches higher so that her head was level with Neill's waist. "You can reach the top now, Neill. Do it! Go over the top!"

He wailed, peevish. "It's too fucking far!"

Desperate, Della made a lateral move to bring her left shoulder tight against Neill's buttocks. Amazed at her own daring, she threw one arm across his trunk, groped frantically for a hold on the other side, found one, clutched it until it cut into her fingers, then hung there, breathless.

"What the fuck are you—? Hey! Stop that!"

"Reach, Neill! Now!" This was their fifth major trial, and they had made—miraculously, it seemed to Della—top scores on all the others. She wasn't willing to give up that rating because of Neill's gutlessness. With a grunt, she thrust upward with all her strength. Above her, she saw Neill relinquish, slowly, his hold on the board. One hand began to claw across the smooth surface, searching for a new grip.

"Damn it, Neill, reach for the top! All the way, Neill! Use that gym muscle you spend so much money for." And she put one last surge of strength behind him.

Finally, his hand found the ledge. Within seconds, he had pulled himself over the edge, scrambling like a rat over a burning wall. Carefully, Della followed his path, taking his hand at the top for a long, smooth pull over the edge. Hoisted, she admired the straining muscles in his bare shoulder and arm. For a moment, she was Eva Marie Saint being yanked from certain death by Jimmy Stewart on the face of Mt. Rushmore. Malicious bastard that he was, at odd times Neill's slim, tightly muscled torso sparked admiration in Della. Everything worked right for him, it seemed. His hours at the gym translated impeccably into sleek, contemporary body cosmetics, successfully straddling the thin boundary between the macho-massive look and the delicate, toney V-shape of a swimmer's body. Jubilantly, she looked at him as she got to her feet, almost prepared to allow him a quick hug. Below them, a crowd of upturned faces was cheering wildly, chanting "Dell-*a*, Dell-*a*, Dell-*a*" in mock drunken-sports-fan rhythm. But Neill seemed barely to notice her. He was jumping up and down on the ledge, facing the crowd, waving his arms wildly. In mild disgust at his egoism and her own lack of consistency in hating him, she plomped down on the ledge, her body suddenly drained and jittery.

"Isn't that *my* name they're calling, Neill?" she asked indifferently.

"Show off," Neill hissed down at her, still jumping up and down on his toes, doing his best to recall Rocky at the top of the capitol building steps.

"Ingrate," she snapped back.

—Five—

"I loved it, really. I'm glad you let me watch."

"Rather a strange thing to do for a first . . ." he paused, looking thoughtful. "For a first time out with a woman," he concluded.

"That's quite a periphrasis for 'date'," Della laughed. "What are you afraid of?" She realized he might not know the learned word she used, but she didn't care. It was already clear to her that he would simply ask her what it meant if he needed to, no harm, no foul. She and Kevin were sitting at a table in Carbandah's only bar—'pub,' as Kevin called it. Earlier, she had watched him giving bagpipe lessons to a group of local kids. Although children usually failed to interest her, watching them work with Kevin, who guided them with strong, easy gestures and gentle corrections, proved very pleasant.

"Where did you learn to play those pipes so well?" she asked.

"In the Highlands, mostly," he replied, wiping foam from his beard with the back of his hand.

"Did you grow up there?"

"Lord, no. I was born right here in Carbandah," he replied. "But I spent several years in Scotland, getting an education, you might say." He put an ironic pronunciation on "education," smiling.

"At St. Michael's? Edinburgh?"

He threw back his head and roared. "Hardly! Mine is not a blueblood's education, although I did take a few classes in Gaelic languages at Edinburgh. No, I learned my business out in the country, with the real Scots people. That's what I went there for." A serious expression smothered his smile, drawing out the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. "I went to Scotland to find out if the old Celtic folk ways still survived. I had longed to do that for as long as I can remember. Stories told me by mah mither did it to me—and my grandmother's, as well—and, until I was almost eighteen, my great-grandmother's. So I went there, and I searched for the old ways for a long time." His expression deepened into the lines of sober reflection.

"Any of the men in the family tell stories, too?" she asked.

Her question shook him from his reverie. After fixing her with a questioning stare, he answered slowly. "I suppose they did, but I wasn't there to hear them. They all died very young. My father was gone before I was four, and my grandfather was killed in a storm at sea when I was in kindergarten."

"So you were raised by three women?" Della asked. "Do you have brothers?"

"No, no brothers," he said, "but there were uncles and male cousins and what-not, so I wasn't completely bereft of male company. What makes you so curious?" His eyes glinted with repressed curiosity.

"No particular reason," Della said, looking down at the table. "It's just that it's unusual to find a man with such a matriarchal family history. I think it makes me"—she searched for a word—"I think it makes me trust you." With the last comment, she felt herself reddening in the cheeks, so she rushed back to the earlier line of conversation. "So what about these 'old ways'?" she said loudly. "Did you find them or not?"

"Yes, I did," he answered, "to a great extent. They're still there, still alive, if you know where to look for them. Sir Walter Scott would be pleased. He did real field work on them, you know, for novels like *Rob Roy* and *The Bride of the Lammermoors*. And the initiates need to trust you, of course." His eyes had wandered away from her, as though he were recalling something very powerful,

perhaps sad. “And then I came home,” he continued, “to teach what I had learned to the young people here.”

“Can you be a bit more specific about what that was, Kevin?” she queried. She didn’t want to press him, but her analytical mind told her that he was withholding something important.

“Well,” he drawled expansively, looking deeply into his beer. “Highland dancing! How’s that?”

Della sat back in her chair, accepting the mild rebuke. It irritated her, but she was thinking about the romanticism of Kevin’s journey to Scotland and of his return to Nova Scotia with ancient folk knowledge, his childhood fantasies fulfilled. She wondered if being a corporate executive were fulfilling any of her cast-off dreams. Certainly she couldn’t recall ever having any goals as selfless as Kevin’s. “A very romantic tale,” she whispered.

“Not romantic at all,” he retorted, almost gruff. “The knowledge I gathered is a trust. At least that’s the way I look at it. And the power is even more sacred.”

“Power?” she interrupted. “That sounds mysterious.” She smiled questioningly.

“It is,” he said, not smiling.

For a long time, they sat silently in the lengthening shadows. Toward the back of the bar, a foursome of teenagers noisily played foosball. Several families sat at other tables arranged in front of red leather couches that lined the walls. The groups seemed to overlap, so that she couldn’t detect where one left off and another began. A heavy middle-aged woman was knitting, seated next to a young girl who was playing cards with a small boy. A few feet away, in a corner, sat a young couple, holding hands and murmuring to each other across cups of tea. Della noted that the girl—pretty, with the ubiquitous dark auburn hair and blue eyes—was quite stout, distinctly larger than her boyfriend, who was broad-shouldered and small-waisted. Altogether, the couple seemed like a younger version of her and Kevin. Suddenly, Della realized that here, among these total strangers, she felt more of a sense of community then she ever had in the business world. Certainly more than what she felt at the camp, where she was surrounded by people she knew, people whose goals and interests she supposedly shared.

“Kevin,” she blurted out, the sound of her voice startling her. “I’m attracted to you.”

“I’m glad,” he said, reaching across the table to put his hand on hers. He performed the gesture without putting anything sexual into it. It seemed friendly, not like a move.

“I don’t usually . . . that is, I don’t. . . .” She broke off and swallowed hard, determined not to look weak, much less apologetic. “I don’t usually feel that way.”

“You mean on a first periphrasis?” He pressed firmly on her hand.

She laughed, then awkwardness overwhelmed her. “No, that’s not it. What I mean is—”

“You don’t have to say it, Della. I think I know what you mean. Is it that you don’t usually feel that way about a man?”

She looked away from him, surprised at his frankness, somewhat relieved. Then, spontaneously, she remembered Neill’s voice in the dream she had the day before leaving New York.

"Are you saying I look like a lesbian?" she asked, unable to smother a note of huffiness. "Or like a 'dyke,' as one of my colleagues recently put it?"

He returned her flustered expression with an even gaze that evinced neither sympathy nor condemnation. "You don't 'look like one' in the way that you mean. But I have—well, let's say I have a special skill at sensing what people are thinking about. And I guess you've been thinking a lot about such things when you've been with me." He took another draught, wiped his mouth again. "And your colleague is a shithead, by the way."

She looked into his eyes, thinking that his bluntness must be some sort of sarcasm, or maybe even braggadocio. But she saw there only the same open honesty she was now accustomed to. "And that doesn't bother you? That my lovers are usually other women?"

"No, it doesn't. But I'd like to change the pattern, if that doesn't sound too macho or heterosexist."

"It does." She laughed, wanting to break the tension. "But I'm not offended. I'm only surprised at how broadminded you are. After all, your home town doesn't exactly look like a bastion of liberalism, if you don't mind my saying so."

"It's not," he agreed. "But my broadmindedness about this doesn't come from Carbandah. It comes from what I learned in Scotland. The old cultures didn't condemn people for what you've done—for what you are—and I don't either."

"Damn," she said, draining her beer. "You sure are a bundle of surprises." And for the first time she saw a hint of coyness in his slight smile.

"More than you know," he said. And the smile came back across his very red lips. "Now how about getting out of here? My mother is staying with her sister tonight, so my house is empty."

"Sorry. I can't, really," Della automatically protested, suddenly remembering the ordeals that awaited her back at the camp. "Breakfast at the camp is at six and I'm dead tired and I . . ." He was standing up from the table, still holding her hand. His height, his shoulders, his hair. Everything except staying with him seem unrealistic, negligible. Neill would raise hell if he discovered she wasn't in her narrow bunk getting a good night's sleep, but she didn't care. Tonight Neill and PharmaSynergy didn't matter.

—Six—

Applause. Scattered laughter. One table near the back began the 'Dell-*a*' chant again—to Neill's intense annoyance, Della noted with satisfaction. The two of them were standing on a platform at one end of the dining room, abreast of three other teams receiving special recognition. She and Neill had earned the highest comprehensive score and had earned the 'Best Team Spirit' citation. The Camp's Director, who was also the CEO of the corporation's Montreal office, was just concluding a short speech extolling the values of hard work and mutual support. *PharmaDramaturgy or whatever the hell your name is*, Della thought, *here I come*.

As they were stepping off the platform, Neill caught her by the arm and steered her toward an empty table. "We need to confer," he said, using his business voice.

"Neill, my mind is made up. I'm not staying."

He shoved her into a chair, seated himself opposite her, knee-to-knee, and fixed her with his most earnest gaze. “This is a wonderful opportunity for you, Della,” he finally said.

Della snorted in disgust. “Look, Neill, every square inch of my body is in pain. I haven’t had a bubble bath in a week. I’m *not* staying on. When the other campers leave tomorrow, I’ll be the first one on a plane. And I’m not skydiving into the Boston airport, either.”

“Della, Della, Della,” Neill began, pressing his fingertips at his temples, as though her attitude pained him. She recognized the salesmanship. He had taught it to her. “You still don’t get it. Only *four* teams made it into this cut. That will look fabulous on your report, *if* you don’t turn coward now. Quitting now will devastate your excellent record. But if you stay, you’ll maximize all your profits.”

“Besides,” he added, lowering his voice. “I hear that they’ve designed some very interesting tests for the finalists. Maybe you can redeem yourself for letting me carry you so far.”

“What?” she barked. “Are you out of your mind? *You* carried *me*—?” She rose to her feet, searching for the best insults.

“All right, all right,” Neill shushed her, the soothing voice turned on thick. “We’re partners; it doesn’t matter. Sit down. “You still want OPS, don’t you? This will put it in the bag. I promise.” He smiled, eyebrows rakishly arched.

Della paused. The idea of remaining at the camp an additional three days filled her with revulsion—all the more, since she had planned to fly back to Halifax from Boston, after losing the other campers (especially Neill) and to go hiking with Kevin for a week. But OPS burned just as brightly before her eyes. Despite everything, it was almost as tantalizing as Kevin, maybe more. If she could land this account and then succeed with it, people like Neill wouldn’t be pushing her around anymore. *No, people more powerful than Neill will be pushing me around*, she thought cynically. But she still wanted the boost that OPS would give her. If she made enough upward movements in the corporate structure, the concept of being ‘pushed around’ would eventually be irrelevant. Wouldn’t it?

“Ah, ah, ah,” Neill crowed. “There’s my girl. I see that hungry-dreamy expression in your eyes.”

“And if I stay,” she stated wryly, regarding him with a baleful stare, “you won’t be stuck for a partner.”

“Does that mean yes?” he cried, jumping to his feet.

“Now wait one minute,” she said, rising and grabbing his arm.

But it was already too late. In an instant, Neill had flagged down the Director and had told him the news. In another, Della was assenting, smiling gamely as Neill and the Director clapped her on the back. For the rest of the evening, through dancing and singing and chattering, Neill hung on her like sodden polyester. They danced together, too closely for Della’s comfort, and when she left for the night, he insisted on accompanying her to her tiny cabin. With several drinks under his belt, his smile had turned into a leer and his hands exhibited a will of their own, but he was also amusing and lighthearted.

“Can I come in for a second?” he asked with a slight slur, as they walked down the dark trails toward her cabin. “Just to talk strategy? I’ll maintain a ten-foot distance, I swear.”

"You may," she laughed. "For two minutes. And make it fifteen feet."

Inside, she groped her way through darkness to a bedside lamp sitting on a low table. During the seconds that she searched with her fingertips for the switch, she suddenly felt the intensity of the deeply-forested darkness. She sensed her detachment from civilization. The dining hall and the other people seemed miles away from where she now stood, in darkness, with Neill. *Funny* she thought. *What makes me think about that* now? She turned the switch almost in panic. She heard three steps creak across the floorboards behind her. Neill's arms were encircling her from behind, his hands quickly finding her breasts . . .

"Hey!" she cried, stifling a scream. "That's not funny." She straightened up; Neill's arms moved higher; his hands locked behind her neck. "Neill," she gasped, "you little prick, stop that immediately and leave—"

Then he fell backward onto her cot, taking her with him like a sack of oats. They landed with an enormous thud on the metal-framed bed, four legs flailing in the air. "That is enough!" she hollered. "Let me go and get up!"

"Della," he whispered into her ear. "Remember when I said you look something like a dyke? Now you can prove I'm wrong." He released his hold, twisting his tapered torso to bring himself on top of her.

For several seconds, Della did nothing, refusing to comprehend that this was really happening. Neill had an MBA from MIT. He was on his way to a junior vice-presidency. He played the piano, trained partly at Julliard. He could make concert level, he said, if he quit his job. He could not be raping her. On the other hand, her shirt was torn open, her bra ripped aside, and a strange hand was frantically groping for the zipper on her jeans.

"Neill!" she howled, just before a pillow was thrust into her face. Something hard—his *knee?*—was pinning her stomach to the bed. Gyrating her hips and shoulders wildly, she pawed at the air with her hands, desperate to find something to brain him with. But she already sensed she was losing the struggle. Her jeans were being jerked down over her hips. The pillow shifted for a second, and she saw Neill, his hand operating with bizarre steadiness, unbuttoning his 501 jeans. *No*. Her mind kept repeating the word. Maybe she was also speaking it, perhaps screaming it. She knew that in another few seconds it would be too late. She thrusted and twisted and lurched, but he seemed to counter every resistance as though he were well-practiced at this type of talking strategy. Any second, his strong, graceful hands would spread her thighs apart. And he would be ready.

When she first heard the rasping, pained exhalation of air, she thought she had made it herself. She was unconscious, she told herself. Neill was ripping inside her right now. But no. There was no weight upon her. She opened her eyes and saw Neill looking down at her from the ceiling where he hovered in the air, his back against the flat ceiling, his arms and legs limply vertical. His shoulders were slumped, his eyes glazed. Trousers and briefs were festooned around his knees; his shirt hung from one shoulder, revealing a trail of red creeping down his chest from his throat. Della lowered her line of vision down his body. More dangling between his legs—but not so much, she noted with grim pleasure. After watching Neill float for a few seconds, she became aware that the small circle of yellow light from the bedside lamp had been replaced by a reddish-green light that spread strange, corporeal thickness over the cabin. Pinpoint flashes of white light, like lightning bugs, sporadically

punctuated the heavy layers of color. And she knew, instinctively, without question, that someone else was in the room with her and Neill. Just as certainly, she knew it was someone who meant her no harm.

A low moan wafted through Neill's slack lips, an eerie, disembodied sound. She looked at him, and instantly his deliciously vulnerable body dropped a few feet, then slammed upward, hard, against the low hardwood ceiling. As he descended again, his irises were pinpoints. The snake of blood now dripped from his chest to the floor.

"Hey!" Della yelled. She got to her knees on the bed, waving both arms wildly at the ceiling. "Do that again! Harder!" She cheered approval, punching at the air, as Neill went flying into the ceiling. Down he came, then up again, each time looking more like a rag doll. "Yes!" Della shouted, jumping up and down on her knees. "One more time!"

Finally, after several blows, Neill was turned upright, then lowered to the floor, his feet just skimming the boards. In another second, the cabin's door flew open, and he was jettisoned outside like an airborne mannequin. The door slammed behind him. The bolt threw itself into place.

"Well," Della said to the empty cabin, elated and aghast. She looked about in the eerily illuminated room, random flashes of the white light still licking at the walls and ceiling. Half-expecting someone to emerge from the shadows, feeling slightly ridiculous, she whispered "Thanks."

She settled back onto the bed, loathing the idea of sleeping where Neill had assaulted her, but unable to resist exhaustion. The white lights had stopped flashing; the swirling bands of red and green were dissipating in the air. Sleep rapidly numbed her. But before she went under, she spoke one word, a question, into the quiet darkness.

"Kevin?"

—Seven—

The morning air carried signs of early autumn. There was a new coolness, the morning light one ghost of a shade more pallid than the days before. The dark green leaves seemed distinctly etched against the sky, their overly lush color signaling that the descent to red and yellow and brown had already started. Della was standing with the other three remaining teams in a forest clearing, staring, apoplectic, as the others were, at a maze of ropes and slings and wooden slats that was suspended far above them between two towers of wood scaffolding.

"Holy shit," one of the others commented, a tall balding man from Kansas. "They must be out of their minds."

As they pondered the ominous construction, Neill joined them. He was limping badly, obviously in pain. Several bandages were taped to his face and hands, the only parts not hidden in thick, insulated clothing. His face was like cheese whey, his voice thick and hoarse.

"What the fuck happened to me last night?" he demanded from Della, dragging her away from the others by her arm. "I woke up in the woods feeling like I'd been run over by a semi. I can barely walk."

"You looked fine when I left the party, Neill," Della answered breezily, chucking him under the chin. "Maybe you ran into a bear on your way home. And I hope you don't mean that about walking, because *that's* our first trial."

She pointed upward. Neill looked at the rope monstrosity and visibly shuddered, his face blanching. He surveyed the hazard speechlessly until the Director announced that Neill and Della would be the first team to cross the bridge. “And remember,” the Director concluded, “the challenges are much more serious now than before.”

Although Della relished Neill’s expression of dread, she had decided that no power on earth would get her to play along with this new hazard. Her body, she told herself, was simply not suited for aerial gymnastics, especially netless. But after a lengthy discussion with the Director, during which Della forcibly restrained herself from calling him a patriarchal dick, she ultimately relented. Partly reassured by the Director’s insistence that she and Neill would be prevented by safety harnesses from falling more than five feet, partly argued into submission by his reiteration that dire consequences would befall any teams who refused to obey orders, and totally annoyed by Neill’s fawning attitude toward the Director, Della was finally induced to march toward the tower and commence climbing, furious at herself, at Neill, at the Director, at the corporation.

Climbing the wooden derricks was tricky, but the two of them proceeded without trouble, except for one bad moment when Neill’s foot slipped from the circular head of a wooden timber and he nearly fell. Neatly, Della caught his wrist and helped him to restore his balance, exchanging not a word or glance with him. Grimly, she climbed on, focusing on the fact that she would be outfitted with a safety harness once she reached the bridge. Even the idea of falling a few feet from the bridge and dangling in mid-air made the breakfast in her stomach feel like chocolate pudding brought to a roiling boil, but she told herself she could live with this, so long as she didn’t plummet to her death. Neill also seemed oddly sobered during their climb. Apparently the gung-ho attitude he had displayed in front of the Director had been a complete sham. After they scrambled onto the top platform, two attendants officiously began fitting them into harnesses. Della monitored their work closely, eager for assurance that her overly large rear end would not hit the ground traveling at 50 MPH. But as she watched the two men fiddling with the metal hooks on stout ropes that extended from hers and Neill’s safety harnesses, a terrible truth began to dawn on her.

“Hey!” she shouted, panic beginning to tease small drops of sweat from her scalp. “You’re attaching me to Neill. You’re supposed to anchor me to something that can’t fall—so that *I* can’t fall. Get the idea?”

“I know my orders,” the man retorted smartly. “Your partner is your anchor. This is an acid test in cooperation and agility.” And with those words he gave Della a shove toward the rope bridge.

“No way!” Della hollered. “No fucking way! That’s a fifty-foot drop! I want to talk to the Director.” She clutched wildly at a corner beam of the tower and resolutely began to wrap her body around it.

“Sixty foot,” the man shot back, attempting to haul her off the post. “Come on, now. Don’t expend your energy on this nonsense.” He viciously jabbed her in the small of her back and, as she crumpled in pain, he body-lifted her over to the bridge’s entrance. Trying to straighten up, she took a single step onto the bridge, but only for the sake of addressing herself to the Director below her. She abruptly knew that she was fed up with this motivation crap,

once and for all, OPS be damned. Neill was standing at her side, looking indecisive.

"You!" she yelled downward. "This is too dangerous. I'm not playing along with—"

"Della, look!" Neill shouted, elbowing her in the side. Somehow, the tower was retreating from them rapidly, already too far away for them to jump for it from the bridge. Looking up, Della realized that the bridge was also suspended from the trunks of two towering pines, something she hadn't noticed before.

"You bastards!" she screamed, dangerously extending herself outward from the network of ropes. "Are you crazy?"

"Look!" Neill said again, this time pointing downward.

Directly below them, the ground was opening. Two long metal tongues, covered before with dirt and grass, were rapidly retracting toward the far end of the bridge. As they moved, they exposed two deep trenches separated by a thick earthen wall. One of the trenches appeared empty, but the other . . the other was filled with . . . Della shook her head, blinking, disbelieving. The trench was filled to the brim with brackish water, a scattering of large rocks, and large slithering creatures that looked incredibly lifelike, the spitting image of real alligators. Some were swimming, in their bottom-heavy fashion, through the water; a few were beached on the larger rocks, gazing about with toothy somnolence. *They must be fakes* Della hoped. *Animatronics.*

"This can't be true," Neill whispered at her side.

Then a wave of intense heat made her recoil as the other trench suddenly burst into life with leaping flames. The entire length of it was ablaze, making the air surrounding the bridge shimmer in thick waves. Della's nostrils filled with a greasy, petroleum scent. Fiery prongs poked almost to the bottom of the bridge. "Let's go!" Neill was yelling, pulling at her arm. "We'll be burned if we don't move! Maybe the gators are fake, but that fire is real."

Plumes of smoke were now clouding the air, lowering their visibility. Still unable to believe what was happening, Della realized that Neill was right: they must get to the other tower and back to the ground. Shooting another glance at a gaping set of saber-lined jaws, she began to grope her way along the wall of ropes, feeling that every inch she moved would send her plummeting toward consumption or immolation. In cross-section, the bridge was roughly triangular, with a central cord running down the middle made from four thick strands lashed together. From this axis, slanted webs of roping extended outward at steep angles, reaching about ten feet from the center. These were held together at their outer edges by thick ropes running parallel to the central cord. But the walls reaching from the bottom of the V were strung with no discernible pattern. For a few feet, a regular grid pattern would prevail, where it was easy to find solid handholds, then there would be a large gap for several feet. At other places, hanging lengths of rope pulled away from the bridge when pulled. After a few horrifying seconds of aimless stumbling, Della hit on a strategy. Bracing her back against the maze of supporting rope, she felt her way along with her hands, keeping her feet on the thick axle. Brusquely, she directed Neill to do the same, facing her, on the opposite side. He obeyed wordlessly, and soon the two of them were inching along like insects trying to escape a web, staring at each other with hardened grimaces of stifled fear.

I want to go home, Della said to herself. *This is an hallucination caused by overwork.*

When Neill fell, she saw it coming. Reaching too quickly for new holds, he momentarily took both hands off the bridge while simultaneously raising one foot from the center rope. When one of his new holds tore away from the bridge in his hand, he plummeted like a stone. In the second that elapsed before the umbilicus connecting them drew taut, Della managed to throw herself face downward on the solid axle, figuring that only this would keep her from being dragged down to flames or apex predators by Neill's falling weight. The full-length belly-whacker nearly knocked her cold, only Neill's screams keeping her conscious. Automatically, she extended all four limbs outward, trying to enmesh them as deeply as possible in the bridge's webbing. The rope extending from her waist to Neill's threatened to snap her body neatly in two from the tension. Vaguely, she heard voices from the ground, but was unable to make out words or cheers or gasps. At the end of the rope, Neill wriggled like an enormous fish impaled on a harpoon. "Stop struggling," she wheezed like a bellows. "It only makes things worse. Pull yourself up. And hurry!"

For once, Neill took her orders like a soldier. She watched him go limp, then swing his body gently forward so that his hands were on the safety cord. He then pulled himself up the six feet of rope, hand over hand, legs hanging motionless below him. Twice he was lapped by flames, his face twisting in pain each time. But he kept climbing, even when one shirt sleeve began to smolder. Despite her hatred, Della was forced to admire his self-discipline and strength, once he had overcome the first onslaught of terror. When he was back upon the bridge, lying in a heap next to Della, he tore the shirt apart, buttons flying, ripping it off just as it burst into flames. Silently, they watched it float downward, burning. As it disappeared into the long line of flame spewing from the ground, Della shifted her eyes to Neill. He was staring at her, panting, his eyes dilated and flashing.

"You saved my life," he said at last.

"Let's go, let's go," Della answered, maneuvering herself back into crawling position.

"I won't forget it, Della," he continued. "I swear it. This has made an impression. I don't remember much about last night, but I'm sure I deserved the ask-kicking. I want to make amends."

"Great, Neill, great. Excuse me if I'm dubious. We can talk about it when we're on the ground, right after I call my lawyer, the police, and my shrink. Let's move!" But as they resumed their perilous inching, she realized she truly hoped that he had told the truth. Maybe she had finally pierced his thick layers of selfishness and egotism, touching something inside that was decent and honest. They were nearly within touching distance of the tower when an entire section of webbing behind Della's back pulled free from the bridge. Her arms flailed, she thrust her legs forward, desperately trying to wrap her ankles around the center rope, but it was no use. Backwards she arced through the noxious air, glimpsing streaky clouds, a pale sun, tips of green firs. Then a violent jerking twist and a dead stop. She rotated a few degrees, a lazily-revolving bobble for the attentive amphibious audience below, which she imagined to be eagerly awaiting her arrival.

"If I'm not dead," she reasoned to herself, "then Neill's still up there. Hang on, Neill!" she cried, trying to swing herself forward to grasp the safety

cord. “Don’t move! I’m coming!” But when her hands connected with the rope and she readied herself for the climb, she discovered that Neill had not only saved them both, but had also managed to draw a jackknife from his jeans, which he now held poised an inch from the rope that was suspending her above a bloody, hot death.

“Huh?” she panted. “What do you need a knife for? What are you—? Neill, you bastard!” He was cutting the line. That scumball, would-be rapist, alleged penitent was killing her. Terrified, she began climbing at top speed, all the time watching Neill hack at the thick rope with his small blade. With several feet left to climb, she knew it was useless. She could see frayed ends multiplying. Neill was nearly half-way through the rope, working grimly, his face a rigid mask of concentration. She screamed at him again to stop, but he took no notice.

Suddenly, the heat and the noise and the taste of smoke began to ebb. By degrees, the many sensations fogging her mind ticked down to a moment of absolute, neutral silence. She continued to gaze at Neill, whose frantic sawing had stopped in mid-stroke, his face captured in an expression of vicious determination. In the vacuum of sensation, Della realized that she was the only one still moving on the bridge. The stillness was like rebirth. Resolutely, she stretched her arm to its utmost limit, pulled upward, then repeated the process in five smooth movements until she could hook one ankle onto the bridge. Hastily, she yanked the knife out of Neill’s grip, fully intending to stick it straight into his lying heart. But as she brought the knife close to his body, she felt the world returning to normal. Slowly, just as they had receded, heat and sound and odor swelled, gaining their original proportions until the world again was a weird cacophony of stimuli. An alligator bellowed in a mournful tone directly below her.

“I ought to kill you right now.” She held the knife at Neill’s throat, wishing it were a bayonet. She delighted in his expression of mingled amazement and fear as his eyes began to refocus.

“What—?” For once, he was at a loss for words. He stared into Della’s eyes, then at the knife, then swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple just scraping the blade.

“Get up and move, Neill. And remember that I’ve got this. You fall again and you’re history.” She put the knife’s blade between her teeth and clamped down, gesturing with her head for him to get back to his side of the bridge. Cowed, he took his place, and in tandem they crept along the last few feet of rope webbing. When they reached the scaffolding, Della neatly sliced the safety cord with one stroke of her knife then descended the tower in seconds, recklessly swinging from one crossbeam to another. Neill was following her slowly, but she suddenly didn’t care about him. She only wanted to get her hands on the camp’s Director.

“Hands, hell,” she huffed to herself, sprinting across the clearing to where he stood. “That bastard is getting a kick in the balls before I even begin turning his face into meatloaf. This is where I put all those Karate lessons to good use.” But as she reached him, she slowed down. The other teams were standing a distance away, looking miserable and frightened. Next to the Director was one of the muscular camp attendants. Holding a rifle.

"Very good, Della, very good," the Director called to her. "You passed admirably. And, as usual, you far outclassed your partner. Now stand over here while the next team takes its turn."

Stymied, she watched silently as an attendant singled out a team and began herding them with the butt of his rifle toward the bridge. The male member of the team was nearly in tears, the woman's face emptied of emotion.

"Holy shit," Della muttered softly. "Through the looking glass."

—Eight—

After an early dinner, Della was escorted to her cabin by an attendant—armed, as they all were now. Before the guard locked her in, she was informed that her next motivation trial would begin immediately after sunset. Drained from the exertions and fear, she lay down on her bunk, the food she had forced down compressing itself into a large, hard lump that dully stabbed her whenever she moved. The events of the day were almost beyond belief, but she realized that the only way out of the BMF now was succeeding at the tests. Dully, she wondered if this were the lesson that the entire system was designed to convey.

"Della," a deep, low voice whispered to her. "Don't be afraid."

She leaped from the cot, immediately suspecting another visit from Neill. "Who said that?" she called, her voice threatening.

From the shadows in a far corner of the cabin, Kevin stepped towards her. At least, the man's shape certainly looked like Kevin's. But there was something odd about him. The colors of his beard and eyes and face seemed pale, almost translucent. The edges of his broad shoulders were blurred, shading into the surrounding darkness. But one thing about him was vivid. Instead of his typical jeans and braces, he was covered in a blood-red robe that reached to the floor. As he moved towards her, it shimmered as though aflame.

"Kevin," she answered, barely audible. "How the hell did you get in here? And nice dress!"

On his ghostlike face, a pallid smile flickered. "In a way, I'm not really here at all. But just the same we don't want that guard coming in. And it's a cloak."

"You were the one who stopped Neill, weren't you? Last night and again today on the bridge? I felt certain that it was you."

"Yes, but we can't waste time talking. I can only maintain a projection this strong for a few seconds. I don't even know if I'll be able to watch you tonight, much less intervene to help you."

"For heaven's sake," she burst out, "just call the police. Tell them what's happening here."

"And what will your friends say when the police arrive? Will they corroborate your story?"

Sobered, she abruptly sat down. The most amazing revelation of the entire day was the attitude of the other campers at dinner. Despite their fear and outrage at the danger they had been forced to confront, they seemed willing to go ahead with the trials. To them, the element of possible death was a logical enhancement of the motivation therapy. At dinner, there had talked excitedly about how rich the rewards would be back at corporate headquarters, considering the extreme danger. While Neill was silent, the other three men

mused the idea that they had never really been in mortal danger that day, that the camp has safeguards in place that were not obvious. The alligators were probably animatronic fakes. Even the flames could be simulated, one of them insisted. When Della had dared to suggest that they try to get help from outside, the faces of her fellow campers, six men and one woman, had turned in silence to stare at her blankly. More than anything she had so far lived through at the camp, that look had made her feel most threatened, most alone. Neill, who would have been gator chow hours earlier if not for her, who had already tried to commit rape and murder, suddenly spoke, only to laugh at her suggestion.

"I see your point," she said glumly to Kevin. "But can't you just get *me* out somehow?" she asked, resenting how much she sounded like a helpless little girl.

"Possibly," the spectral Kevin answered. "Is that really what you want me to do?"

She pondered. Escaping the camp would mean safety. And she would be with Kevin. But she would also be finished with her company. Hell, she would be washed up altogether in business. The people who had arranged this death camp, who kept it running, obviously would use all their power to ostracize anyone who absconded with the secret of what really happened here. Possibly they would even go so far as to have her killed. They could do it. Enough power and enough money make anything possible. And she was already close enough to the upper circles of power to know that ethics and morality were never factored into decision making. And Open PharmaSynergy, the golden ring of the Nibelungen, the winning lottery ticket in an ocean of worthless paper, was still to be considered. Hell, if she could just survive this nightmare, she'd have OPS and a dozen other major accounts. And then she might be able to make the system more fair to others, especially to other women. Finally, she looked up from the floorboards and spoke gently.

"No," she said. "I guess I need to see this thing through."

"That's what I thought," a thin, hollow voice replied. Kevin's form was nearly transparent now. His face had entirely vanished, except for the ice-blue eyes and flecks of his ruddy beard, which hovered eerily above the still-brilliant gown. "I'll watch. I'll help, if I can. Be careful, Della. I . . . "

And his voice dwindled to nothing. She rose from her bed and followed the last vestiges of his form as they receded, miniaturizing, into the heavy darkness. "Kevin!" she half-cried. "I'll find you when this is over. Wait for me." She swallowed hard as the last pinpoints of blue and auburn winked out. Finally, his robe evaporated to a long stain of bright red that slowly faded to rose, then to pink, then to nothing, leaving her alone again in the dark room.

And then there was a knock on the door.

—Nine—

Green and black shades of night were reaching from the deep forest, overrunning the compound, when Della and the other campers were summoned from their cabins. The Director was absent, but his next-in-command, a body-builder dressed entirely in black leather with livid skin and a shaved head, hustled them into three open jeeps, ignoring their questions. They entered the woods on a narrow dirt road before coming to a halt in a circular clearing, its

circumference marked by burning torches that cast convulsing shadows. The Director stood there, smiling broadly, dressed in woodsy L. L. Bean clothing. As Della jumped from the jeep, she noticed a portable gun rack sitting on the ground, holding several rifles.

"Tonight's trial," the Director addressed them, "will enhance your instincts for survival at all costs. You'll be equipped with state of the art laser weaponry. These rifles fire beams that change the color of devices that will be strapped to your chests." He lifted up a leather harness for them to see. Two straps crossed in the front to form an X that was affixed at dead center with a silver disc the size of a saucer.

"The disc turns from silver to green when the game begins. When a rifle beam hits the target, the glowing green color changes to flashing red, indicating that you are disqualified. A radio signal is also automatically transmitted when the color changes, which will keep me informed of the game's progress. If you are shot," he continued, "you must return here. Your rifle will be electronically deactivated when the color of your disc changes. You can have absolutely no participation in the game of any kind after you are disqualified. Do not even talk to your partner. Wherever you are in the hunting grounds, you are visible to us in the command center on monitors."

Neill, who had been avoiding Della since the bridge trial, was suddenly standing at her side. "This will be a cinch," he whispered. "I'm a crack shot. How about you?"

"I have a hand gun," Della whispered back. "And I practice sometimes at a shooting gallery. But I've never used a rifle."

"I'll brief you," he said, enthusiasm growing in his voice. "Once we're started, you cover my rear and let me take point. You'll be safer that way."

"At least this trial looks safe," Della said, ignoring the irony of Neill pretending to care about her safety. "I could care less about anything else." The Director was distributing the rifles while attendants strapped the campers into harnesses. Quickly, the teams separated from each other as the members examined their equipment and whispered busily, planning strategies.

"Remember," the Director's voice boomed, "you are expected to work in teams. The colored fluorescent bars on your helmets identify the teams you belong to. Both members of a team must survive in order to receive top scores. The hunting takes place within an area of one square mile. The perimeter is enclosed by a wire fence. When you hear this sound"—he gave a sample blast on a brass horn that made Della think of Bavarian hunting lodges—"scatter in different directions. Your rifles will become operational in exactly five minutes. This trial has no limit. It ends when one team stands alone or one individual."

Neill and Della retreated to the clearing's edge after receiving their equipment. Beneath a torch's flame, Neill began giving Della a crash course on how to operate and aim the rifle, emphasizing differences that he anticipated between shooting a firearm and a laser.

"There obviously won't be any kick," he said. "And you won't have to do any correcting in your aim for distance or wind."

"Neill," Della said, her nerves straining for the sound of the starting horn, "I don't like this. It's too mild. Earlier today they were prepared to kill us, and now this looks like some dipshit, macho version of playing soldier. I don't trust them."

“You’re missing the obvious,” he said. “The mildness proves that we were safe doing the rope bridge, despite appearances. Just trust me,” Neill assured her. “I’m your partner. I’ll keep you out of harm’s way.”

“You?” Della laughed scornfully, unable to contain herself any longer. “You must be out of your mind. Do you think I’ve forgotten what you did today—not to mention last night? The first thing I should do when this gun turns on is put you out of the game.”

“Don’t do it, Della,” he retorted. “I don’t remember anything about last night. And you misinterpreted what I was doing on the bridge. It was part of a plan to save you.”

She opened her mouth, furiously spluttering for words. But just as she formed an opening invective, an amplified blare vibrated through the night in all directions, the foreboding wail instantly triggering thoughts of air raids, emergency vehicles, and violent death. She froze, staring at the source of the sound.

“Don’t just stand there!” Neill shouted, shoving her between two trees. “Move!”

Together they sprinted, stumbling over rocks and branches covering the worn path that wound deeply into the woods, edged with thick undergrowth. But the path soon dwindled away and they were confronted by a solid, massive front of old-growth forest, the gaps between trees dense with fallen logs, shrubbery, and hanging vines.

“Come on,” Neill shouted. “We’ll have to bushwhack our way to some place we can use as a base. I calculate our guns will become operational in less than 3.5 minutes.”

With grim determination, Della hacked away, ducking under snapping branches, falling onto her knees countless times. Flailing at the forest, she caught glimpses of Neill fiddling with gadgets on his gun, even once or twice regarding himself in his camouflage clothing. Neill, she realized, was letting her do all the grunt work. But she felt too much urgency to stop and negotiate with him.

“Perfect,” Neill finally said, as Della shoved away a fallen trunk to reveal a very small clearing perched on the edge of a ravine that steeply plummeted to a dry stream bed. “We’re unapproachable here on two sides. Keep low and quiet.”

Della squatted on her haunches, breathless, fearing that at any second a band of laser-toting desperados would come bursting out of the black gaps between the trees and start firing. Strangely, it didn’t lessen the fear to know that they would only be shooting harmless light beams. Trying to calm herself by breathing deeply, she heard a tiny beep from her weapon, followed by the flicker of a power light mounted atop the barrel. In another second, the disc on her chest came to life, humming very softly as a green hue spread over the metallic surface.

“Now we’re armed,” Neill called softly to her. “Sit tight while I plan our next move.”

Only too happy to stay low, Della belly-crawled to where Neill squatted on the ground, invisible save for the glowing bars of white light on his helmet.

“I have an idea, Neill. We just wait for the three other teams to kill each other off. Then we automatically win.”

“Coward,” Neill snorted in disgust. “What makes you think they won’t come across us while they’re hunting each other? Buck up, Della, because it’s time you manned up on this team. Now here’s my plan.” He spoke breathlessly, telling her they would wait until they saw laser fire from the first skirmish. Then they would steal in quietly and pick off the surviving team.

“But what if—” But just then an electric-blue line angled through the sky straight ahead of them, not far away.

“Here we go,” Neill snapped, gleeful. “We’ll maintain a distance of less than twenty feet from each other as we close in. Careful not to let your helmet light give you away. When we get in position, hold your fire until I give you the word.”

“Shit,” Della grumbled to herself, beginning to slither through the forest. “I couldn’t hit one of those discs if it were five feet away. I hope he really can shoot.”

Several more shots etched the black night with spidery blue lines as they closed on their quarry. Della heard muffled shouts. Then ominous noises behind her made her whirl around, ready to fire at whoever was stalking them from behind. But no one appeared, and Neill, off to her right, snarled at her twice not to give away their position with wild firing. Finally, they reached the vantage point of a sloping hillock overlooking a long, narrow clearing. From their perch just within the trees, they were close enough to see the battle site. Two teams were dug in on opposite sides of the strip, crouching low behind blinds of fallen trunks and low bushes. Their laser fire crisscrossed the air with blue filaments, so vivid and dazzling that Della momentarily was dazed.

“Down, down,” Neill was whispering to her, motioning wildly with his arm. “One of them will make a break for it sooner or later. Then we spring.” Even as he spoke, one member of the team on the left leaped from his hiding place and raced toward a thick-trunked tree near the middle of the cleared strip, just inside the line of trees. Della perceived his plan. If he could get behind the tree, he would be able to pick off at least one of his opponents. But before he was safe, a member of the other team, the only other woman remaining at the camp, dove headlong toward the same tree, did a barrel roll several feet along the ground, and neatly came to a halt on her knees after the last revolution. The sprinter was caught dead in her sights.

“Way to go, woman,” Della thought, waiting for her to fire. “Wish you were with me instead of Neill.” When the shot lit the air, it hit the man’s green disc point-blank. Della craned her neck to see how this would affect the skirmish among the remaining three. For several seconds, the dead man looked uncertain what to do. At first, he walked towards his assailant, his hand slightly outstretched, but she lithely skittered behind cover, apparently realizing that the survivor on the other team might start firing again at any minute.

“Poor guy looks like a fool,” Della said, watching keenly.

The man then turned and calmly began walking back toward his partner, chin on his chest as he looked down at the disc. The color had changed almost instantly to a flashing blood red, but now something was happening that the Director had not mentioned. The light was throbbing in vivid shades of orange and yellow, as though it were attuned to the man’s heartbeat. “Uh oh,” Della whispered, her initial forebodings suddenly reawakening. Abruptly, the man stopped and began clutching at his chestplate. His efforts quickly became frantic as he reached around to the straps on his back, searching for clasps or

hooks to remove the harness. From where she crouched, Della saw panic in his eyes. Abruptly, he emitted a high, jarring wail that conveyed gut-level terror—and pain.

"Neill!" Della called, frozen in her position, feeling cold sweat running down her sides from her armpits. "What's happening to him?" But she didn't hear Neill's answer. The harshly shining spot of tangerine on the man's chest was expanding. Thick yellow tentacles of light were extending outward from the center, forming a grotesque vision of an enormous arachnid in day-glo colors, a nightmare that made Della think of hideous LSD hallucinations and schizophrenic fantasies. The man had thrown himself on his back, arching his body so sharply that only the back of his head and his heels danced upon the ground. The orange light swelled to enormous size, a bloated, over-ripe fruit about to burst. The ropes of yellow slithered about, searching, reaching, until they completely enveloped the man. His arms and legs flailed maniacally, his screams now muffled by an electric hissing generated by the orange and yellow obscenity. Suddenly, the throbbing mass exploded, shooting off streamers of multi-colored light twenty feet into the air. When the glare subsided, Della saw a wet, smoking patch where the man had lain. Puddles of dark red liquid lined its length. At the top were scattered blackened pieces of bone and a darkish, slimy residue.

"No," Della wailed to herself, turning away from the scene. "It just can't be." But even in her horror, she knew what she had to do. Oblivious now to giving away their presence, she thrashed over to where Neill lay belly-down on the ground. "Get this harness off me, Neill," she barked. "Now."

"I can't," he almost whined, his face drained of color. "It's against the rules."

Della pushed him over onto his back with one foot and lowered her rifle within inches of his disc. "Get it *off*," she hissed with all the menace she could muster. "Or you'll be the next to go." And she snatched his rifle from his grasp.

"Okay, okay," he said, climbing reluctantly to his feet and beginning to pull and yank at the straps running across her back. But after a few seconds, she felt him stop.

"I can't do it, Della," he said. "There's a lock. A strong one."

"No!" she shouted. "Get it off!"

"Look at mine if you don't believe me," he answered.

Hastily, she inspected his harness and discovered that he had told the truth. The straps crossing Neill's back clipped into a central hub that was capped with a large, shiny lock.

"We've got to see this through, Della," he said to her. "It's the only way."

"And kill other people?" she exploded. "Are you nuts? No one else will continue this insanity when they see what happens to the losers!"

"You naïve idiot," Neill said, his voice hard and even. "You really believe that? Look!" Grabbing her shoulders, he spun her around to face the clearing. What she saw almost made her fall to her knees. Two more of the fiery spiders had appeared in the clearing, their electric tentacles writhing, almost touching. Screams from the two people trapped inside the monsters ululated through the air. One person, the lone woman, was left standing in the clearing, her rifle hanging limply at her side. She stood several feet away from the growing pyres, motionlessly watching them. Unconsciously, Della pushed her fists into her ears to block out the hideous sounds of pain and crackling electrical power. She

wrenched herself away from Neill's hold, sick at the thought of witnessing the final explosions.

"Watch!" Neill said, violently jerking up her head and shoving her forward. "This is what will happen to us if you give up. The other players won't stop until the game is over."

"I can't," Della protested, stifling the raspy sobs that were parching her throat. "I can't just *kill* people, Neill. Leave me alone!"

"This is the perfect time," Neill whispered, his voice sinister. "She's lowered her guard. Probably in shock or something." Deftly, he extricated his rife from Della's limp hand. "You circle to our left and close in. I'll go straight forward. When I'm near the edge of the clearing, I'll try to pick her off. If I miss, you come in closer and we'll get her in a crossfire."

He breathed in short, hot gulps on Della's neck, his black eyes dilated and bright. "She won't have a chance," he sniggered. "Move!"

Della blindly obeyed. She had no intention of firing her weapon, but putting space between herself and Neill seemed to be the wisest course of action. He was enjoying this. It didn't matter to him that three people were dead, that he might next be dead. The adrenaline that was pumping through his body apparently had numbed any rightful sense of danger, as well as giving him new energy. Positioning herself behind a tree, she espied him closing in on his target. The surviving woman was still standing out in the open, affording him an easy target. Stealthily, Neill stepped to the very edge of the cloaking trees, lifted his rifle, and took aim. At that moment, the woman in his sights slightly turned so that her breastplate directly facing him. Della took a long breath, the silence unbearable, the muscles in her body feeling like stainless steel bands in a clock wound too tightly. Her mouth quivered, a thin line of saliva dripping from one corner, as she struggled against the urge to break the tension, to make the clock's mainspring burst.

"No!" she screamed, her entire body quivering. "No! Run!"

Neill fired as the woman dove for the ground. On her way down, she returned Neill's carefully-aimed single shot with a wild spray of light. It looked as though Neill still had her, but just then the entire clearing was raked with laser fire. The fourth team, which had been approaching from the other side, began firing at both the woman and Neill from the opposite side of the cleared strip. Neill sprung backward into the forest just as a shot from the far side found its mark on the woman's chest. Immediately, she hurled away her rifle and began yanking ferociously at the harness, wrapping her arms around her body, reaching in wild contortions for the straps on her back. She ran and staggered in circles around the remains of the other two, tossing her head forward and backward like a horse trying to buck off a lion biting into its withers. But to no avail. Again, the process of dilating orange and enmeshing tentacles began and soon she was prostrate on the ground, one arm still yanking at the lethal harness. But her death throes were entirely ignored. All the while, the new team was lambasting Neill with laser fire. Della saw him skip-hopping close to the ground, like a rabbit, deeper into the forest for more cover. By luck or intent, he came straight to where Della hid.

"You bitch!" he screamed at her, simultaneously back-slapping her on the face with all his strength. She went flying, pain ringing through her ears, the rifle falling to the ground. "I had her, I had her right in my sights, and you go and fucking warn her. Whose team are you on, you moron?"

“No one’s!” Della shrieked, rolling over on her back and looking up at him. “I’m not in this game! This is madness!” She wiped away blood running from her mouth. “If you had any brains or any soul you’d realize that! This is murder!”

Neill stared down at her silently, the muscles of his face jerking and twitching as though something small and scaly had crawled under the skin. “Della,” he said, his voice calm, “if you’re not working with me, you’re working against me. That’s what this whole trial is meant to teach us. We don’t need to survive, remember.” He raised his rifle, slowly closing his finger around the trigger. “You’ve been working against me the whole time. Making me look bad. Sucking up to the other campers and making them think you’re hot shit. When we came up here, I really thought I could help you, Della. I thought I could make you understand what it takes to be successful in business—maybe even what it takes to be a woman. But I was wrong. You’re beyond hope. “This will be a pleasure,” he said, snugging his finger tighter against the trigger.

“Do it, then!” Della screamed, a shudder of fury and anger rippling through her entire body “Do it, if you’ve got the guts, you pathetic worm! I’m not afraid of you!”

Neill squinted one eye shut, lodged the rifle stock squarely against his shoulder. “Good-bye, Della.”

She shut her eyes just as a deafening clap of thunder quaked through the air. An instant later, the black forest flashed into garish light, a smell of ozone suddenly permeating the atmosphere. In another instant, she heard an ominous ripping sound, like a massive two-by-four slowly, crudely being smashed into pieces. She opened her eyes and saw Neill frozen in a white snapshot, his terrified gaze locked onto an enormous branch directly overhead. A lightning bolt had sliced it in half. In what seemed like slow motion, it was slowly ripping away from the trunk. Shards of bark and pulp rained down, one of them hitting Neill directly in his upturned face. Still lying on her back, Della shot herself forward like a projectile, using her arms for all the velocity she could muster. Her legs wrapped around Neill’s, she twisted a quarter-turn, and he was down on top of her, rifle flying. Off- guard, he struggled uselessly, giving her time to push him away, full-length. He thudded heavily onto his back and for one moment they lay spent, dazed, before both scrambled to their feet. But Della was faster, grabbing Neill’s cast-off weapon on her way up. When Neill was erect again, he was standing at the end of her readied rifle, the end of the barrel planted firmly against his glowing green disc.

“Hey,” he said slowly, his voice like a dry sponge brushing across newspaper. He licked his lips, regarding the changed circumstances. “Hey, Della. Take it easy, now. I was just giving you a good scare, you know.” Torrential rain began to fall as he talked, sheeting his face with glistening drops.

Wordless in her anger, Della fingered the trigger, wondering if even Neill, scum that he was, could force her to commit murder. But wouldn’t it be self-defense? If she didn’t shoot him now, wouldn’t he turn on her again, inevitably? But a volley of laser fire stopped her thoughts, surrounding them from two directions, just as another clap of thunder split her ears.

“Shit,” she cursed herself, wiping rain from her face. “I almost forgot about those guys. Even if I waste Neill, I’ve still got to kill them.” But the less appealing alternative was being killed herself.

But she was wrong. The residual quakes were just fading from the first thunderclap when another one split the air, then another, then a third, each one louder than before, until she, Neill, and the team pursuing them were all on their knees, muffling their ears. The explosions were so loud they were blinding, not just deafening, but Della forced her eyes open, trying desperately to hold Neill at bay and simultaneously watch out for the other team. But one endless, stunning sheet of lightning bled into another until the entire landscape was whited out, casting the world into bizarre photographic negative. Feeling as though noise and light were ripping her open from the inside out, Della lost her grip on the rifle, fell backward, and pushed her face into the ground to stop the assault on her senses. When she finally looked up, she had no idea how much time had elapsed, but Neill was still standing inches away from her and the storm was still raging. Urgency spreading through her veins again, she wildly began groping through the leaves and fallen branches for the rifle, wondering why Neill had not already shot her. But a high, piercing cry arrested her frenzied groping. Turning around, she saw Neill jerk like a marionette high above the ground, smashing into the ragged stump where the branch had broken. For a moment he hung motionless, then he was shooting through the flashing night toward the clearing, where he fell to earth in a heap. He lay still in the center as the other two men dashed in to join him, all their limbs flapping wildly, their shouts of alarm merging with the bellowing thunder.

With Neill whisked away, Della's immediate fear abated. Leaping to her feet, she raced to the edge of the clearing, where she saw a group of men descending the slope on the opposite side. It was the Director and his men, approaching on foot, carrying flashlights and more laser rifles, making a great deal of noise as they arrived at the clearing's edge. The Director himself was leading the party, calling something to the black leather man at his side, but his words were lost to Della in the ongoing thunder and driving rain. As he emerged from the woods, however, the Director was silenced. The same force that had jerked Neill and the rival team to the center now snatched the Director from where he stood, followed an instant later by his assistant. One by one, the staff members were plucked off their feet, lifted a few feet into the air, then propelled like leaves on a violent wind to the clearing's center, where they were dropped heavily onto the ground. Ultimately, the clearing was strewn with the stunned forms of over a dozen men. Within a few seconds, many were struggling to their feet, but others lay dazed, torsos and legs and arms wantonly overlapping in a crazy heap, like those of a bad little girl's rag dolls. Neill, Della noted, was just beginning to rouse himself, heaving to his feet, bewildered. The Director, preceding the others to full alertness, began grabbing men at random, hauling them to their feet, shaking them, apparently screaming orders or questions into their faces. He rampaged about until everyone had risen, trying to follow his commands. But gradually all the men, even the Director, fell motionless and still. Then their faces—slowly, one by one, as though they all had decided at the same moment to check their shoelaces, turned downward. From her vantage point, Della saw before they did what captured their attention. Beneath their feet, the ground began to heave. At first, a single, gentle, tremor passed through the clearing's heart; then came another roller, this one peaking several feet high in the epicenter. The beaten earth stretched, convulsed, and momentarily flattened again before a rapid surging pattern began. For several minutes, the captured men feinted and sidestepped and

danced, riding the swells with varying degrees of agility, but soon most had fallen on their faces, shouting, kicking at those who fell on top of them. The Director, shakily upright, was still barking orders. Then a final tremor ended with an enormous gash tearing the ground apart. A cloud of greyish vapor belched up, followed by bright orange flames that leaped high into the air. Several men immediately fell into the seam, others clung to the rough edges for seconds before losing their holds and falling or having their hands stepped on in the mad mêlée that began. The survivors instantly bolted from the epicenter, but one by one they bounced backwards, colliding full-force with some invisible obstruction that formed a perimeter, keeping them closely hedged in towards the steadily enlarging chasm. After a few minutes of frantically inspecting the new danger, a few of the men regained enough strength and cunning to hurl themselves like battering rams against the invisible boundary, but they crumpled and fell to the quaking earth like moths flying into a mirror.

There was no escape. The ground continued to crumble inward, puckering along the edges of the gash until it became a hideous, voracious chasm into which men fell headlong. A sudden sheet of flame leaping from the pit enveloped one man just as he teetered on the edge, both arms floppily revolving as he struggled to maintain balance. He screamed in the bath of flame, ignited, and plummeted downward, a red and orange pyrotechnic display. Others died just as hideously, but Della's attention became riveted by Neill's efforts to remain alive. Once he rocked drunkenly on the chasm's edge, facing the yawning abyss with wild-eyed panic. Della thought he was finished, but as he reeled into the gulf, he reached back, grabbed another man's shoulder, and used it as ballast to jerk himself clear of the edge and to send the hapless pawn toppling into the black scar. Neill then sprinted to the force field, where he began hammering his hands and knees, even his head, against the impervious, invisible barrier. Behind him, the last of the campers were falling to their deaths or burning in the heat or suffocating in the oxygen-spent air. The Director, his face a paroxysm of terror and fury, went slipping into the fetid black air, clutching still at his second-in-command's arm as the seam reached its greatest breadth. Then only Neill remained, still tearing at the invisible wall with bloodied hands, his mouth foaming as he screamed unheard obscenities and threats. At last, the disappearing earth caught up with him and he fell from sight. But as the space where he had stood filled with smoke and fire and flying debris, his black eyes seemed to remain behind, hovering for an instant, the white orbits around them now bloody red. And Della heard, or imagined she heard, his last cry, which was her name, the last syllable reverberating into an echoing wail sinking into a bottomless cavern as Neill plumbed the depths of mother earth. Sickened, Della turned away from the carnage, wondering if even Neill and the Director merited such ghastly retribution. Kevin stood a few feet before her, dressed in his warlock's robe, as he had been earlier that night. But this time, Della realized at once, his form was not a projection. His face glowed with ruddy color, bathed in sweat from his exertions. His eyes were the same dark blue, but now the laughter in them was vanished. He looked somber, saddened.

"I couldn't leave you to face them alone, Della. Not even if you wanted it that way."

But when he stepped closer, she backed away. "Don't touch me," she sobbed. "Did you have to kill them all? It was so . . . so grisly, awful!"

“I had no control over it, Della. I didn’t kill them. I only unleashed their own hidden natures against them. If they had been different people—more like you—nature wouldn’t have punished them. I created a bridge between them and an ancient power that judged them and acted. If a single one of them had been worthy of mercy, the ending would have been different.”

She searched his face and her instincts knew he spoke the truth. This man, although he had powers possessed by no one else, was the only person she had ever known not corrupted by power and greed. She knew he was just. Stepping closer, she put her arms around him and brought her face close to his. “Let’s leave this place, Kevin. Let’s go somewhere. Anywhere.”

A wafer-thin line of light spread across the horizon as they embraced. For a long time, as a greyish dawn slowly suffused the dark night, they stood there, motionless. Behind them, the wounded earth quietly knitted the ragged edges of the scar into a new and seamless surface.

—Epilogue—

She had expected to raise a few eyebrows, the day she sauntered back into her office after spending two glorious weeks with Kevin in Newfoundland and Labrador. Even though they had resolutely avoided all forms of communication with the outside world, word reached them that the mysterious disappearance of eighteen people at a corporate retreat in Cape Breton was making news all over the maritimes. Standing on a wharf in a tiny village on St. George’s Bay, Della had seen a Halifax newspaper with the headline: “No Clues in Disappearance of American Business Executives and Camp Staff.” Kevin, breaking their pledge while in a bait and tackle shop, skimmed an article in a tabloid and found Della’s name in a list of people feared dead.

So she knew she would have explaining to do, at least to her bosses, if not the police, back in New York. Still, her reception was unanticipated. Everyone she encountered apparently had heard the news, right down to the elevator operator and the elderly lady who trundled a lunch wagon from office to office at noon. Within an hour after sitting down at her desk, she had been summoned to the Executive Board Room. For her very first time.

“You understand our position, I’m sure, Miss . . . ah, Miss . . . ?” The CEO’s lips hung open, waiting assistance.

“Ms. Turner,” Della said flatly.

“Yes, quite right: Miss *Turner*,” he pronounced her last name triumphantly, as though he had done something bright. “There’s already been a dreadful amount of negative publicity. Very unfortunate for the firm. We certainly don’t want the fire to be fanned again when you talk to the police.” He was sitting to the left of the corporation’s president, who was leaning far back in his leather chair at the end of the long ebony table. Arranged around them were five other men, all senior executives, three of whom Della had never seen before. She suspected they were attorneys. Della was seated at the opposite end, some twenty feet distant from the enclave of dark-suited, middle-aged men who were white to the point of pallor. On the wall to her right hung a huge rectangular mirror, the same length as the table, framed in matching black wood. In its shadowy surface, Della eyed the tableau that she and the men and the table created.

She let a long pause elapse, then spoke. “Perhaps we should start with your telling me how much of the truth about the camp you have already told the police. And how much you have lied.”

Her last word created a subdued flurry. Six heads bent close together, whispering across the table in front of the president, who continued to slouch back in his chair, his face swallowed by the shadows that filled the far end of the room. At length, the heads looked up. “‘Lie’ certainly does not seem an appropriate word in this context,” one of the lawyers finally said.

“Well,” Della said, her voice nonchalant, “I need to know in advance if the police know that people were routinely killed at the camp, don’t I?”

Another conference, this one more urgent, a few strong gestures accompanying the whispers. Eventually, another lawyer head lifted itself from the huddle and spoke. “We have absolutely no knowledge of life-threatening situations ever existing at the Behavioral Motivation Facility,” he said.

“Hmmmm,” Della commented. “Seems like the authorities are about to get a big surprise.”

A third conference, the conspiratorial drone this time punctuated by isolated words. “Disaster” and “smear” and “scheming bitch” echoed down the table to Della’s ears. When the heads receded this time, the president was sitting upright in his chair, hands folded on the table before him. A pleasant smile was drawn across his smooth face.

“Ms. Turner,” he began grandly. “Della, if I may? My advisors have just pointed out to me that you are long overdue for a promotion to a junior vice-presidency. It would give me such pleasure to rectify this situation immediately.”

“Right,” Della replied, then let another long pause settle onto the table. “Is that it?” she finally asked.

“The promotion includes a significant raise in salary, of course.” The president’s face lost a shade of its benign blandness.

“Very significant,” murmured the CEO, his head bobbing.

“I guess that’s okay for starters,” Della said crisply, pulling herself to her full height. Abruptly, she slapped her hands, palms downward, onto the table.

“Starters?” came a chorus.

And at that minute the long mirror suddenly crashed to the hardwood floor, silvery fragments showering upward, then clattering onto the floor. All six torsos at the end of the table violently jerked around to stare at the blank wall, then looked down at the glittering mosaic. Finally, they turned back to Della.

Hot Damn, Della shouted to herself, trying to keep her face impassive. *Couldn’t have worked better if Kevin had done it.*

Heavy silence draped the room and the silent men as Della stood up before her chair. Placing her hands on the table, she leaned forwards, smiling fiercely. “Gentlemen,” she said, very quietly, “Now that I have your attention, I think we can commence negotiating.”

Fin de Siècle

In the middle of the darkened room, at the center of a raised dais, a single object stands: a boudoir chaise lounge in delicate mauve. Upon it are thrown overstuffed pillows in pastel satin covers, edged with heavy tassels. A circle of ornate, wrought iron candelabra surrounds the dais, each one bearing a dozen red candles burning with tall, guttering flames.

Into the circle of flickering light walks a single figure. Black leather boots cover his legs to the hips. Shirtless, he wears a black hood from which a black ostrich feather flutters lightly in the stillness. He carries in his arms a motionless form dressed in a gown of diaphanous white. Thrown back as though dead, the yellowed ivory keys of a dusty piano, the arms bounce lightly as the man walks. Approaching the divan, he gently settles the figure into the soft plush, taking care to arrange the pillows, to lay the long skirts of the chemise so that they drape gracefully to the floor. He smooths back the long blonde hair from the deathly white face.

From beyond the ring of torchieres, low noises are heard. A sigh. A murmur of approval. Breathless, the word 'lovely.' Softly into the darkness, like the calls of someone lost, break the first violin notes of Liszt's third symphonic poem. The slow violin and flute cadence scents the tableau until the brass trumpets crack the melancholy.

His ministrations complete, the executioner quickly steps to the divan's head. Lifting high the wasted arms, he removes a length of silver surgical tubing from a hidden boot pocket, then tightly binds the wrists together. Bending down, he reaches underneath the divan to retrieve a large round-bottomed bowl of polished silver. With one more motion, a short chain is unclipped from the leather cartridge belt X-ing the man's muscular chest. First, he hooks the snaffle to the tubing; then, stretching the arms to their full length, he clips the other end to a metal eyelet in the floor. The supine figure's torso arches upward, the swells of its rib cage suddenly pressing through the sheer white satin. From the audience, a startled cry: "Mon Dieu! Elle est vraiment la plus belle que nous l'avons vu!"

The victim so arranged, the hooded man steps away. With a gloved hand, he strokes at the beads of sweat that have trickled from underneath the hood, trailing palely across his chest. For a moment, he seems uncertain what to do, but then he reaches to his harness, and, with a muted flourish, retracts from an unseen sheath a silver-handled knife. A single loud gasp from the audience

fades in the air, as he raises it above his head, flashing the straight silver blade in the yellow light. For several long seconds, he stands still, holding the knife horizontal, its pointed tip pincered between two black fingers, the sheath grasped firmly in a black fist.

The excitement no longer can be restrained. Hungrily, faces from the dark come closer to the edge of light, their eyes and teeth and lips licked into wet shininess by the dancing flames.

"Yes," says one voice. "The knife!"

"Her arms," says another. "So thin! So tragic!"

The ring tightens upon the divan. The symphonic poem modulates the heavy chords of its processional. Candlelight reflects in a pair of eyeglasses framed in pink rhinestone-flecked plastic. It catches upon the gold and silver threads in a dozen scarves and turbans, flashes in retreat from shining black leather, from dangling chromium chains and metal studs. As the light dances madly, the breathy expostulations settle into a steady rhythm, a lurching chant that calls for one thing.

"Her blood!" they cry. "Le sang précieux!"

As though in response, in an arc almost languorous, the glittering blade descends. It pauses only for an instant at each wrist, like a schoolboy's first awkward kisses, but as it ascends again, the blood already flows in a strong, healthy stream, cascading down the hands, washing over the down-stretched fingers, dripping like hard spring rain into the bowl below.

Blood shines against silver. Amber light flows from golden thread to silver link to red glass. An exhalation of relief sighs through the darkness. And in the center of the room, on the divan on the dais, through the white-clad slender form, pulses a long, convulsing shiver of unknown sensations.

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A long pause elapsed before the man in the charcoal silk suit answered the last question. The battered wall clock looked like a relic from public high schools in the age of the atomic café. The red second hand moved in jumps. A silk tie in a loud splash pattern of lime and purple offset the man's dark suit. A tall bald man on the other side of the glass made a hand gesture.

"It was . . . " Another weighty interval. Several jumps from the clock. The man's voice was deep and low, a rasp pulling at its timbre like a small bone in the throat. "a work of art," he finished.

From the other side of the desk, a snort, surrounded by a lungful of cheap cigar smoke.

"So you off this guy and you call it a *work of art*? Could I be missing something here, or does this sound like the Marquis de Sade's aesthetic code?"

The carefully dressed man pulled himself up in his plastic chair. The voice remained low, but the scaly catch disappeared. A few more jumps from the wall. The two men stared at each other across the formica-topped paper that sat in the room's center, underneath an overhead apparatus holding several long microphones that to Stephen looked somehow old-fashioned. Their snubbed ends annoyingly poked into the periphery of his vision as he talked to the man across the table.

"Like everything else," he finally said, "aesthetic standards are adaptable to changes in context."

"Yeah?" said the other man, in a tone of exaggerated detachment. "And what the hell is *that* supposed to mean?" He darted a glance at a technician who was motioning at him from the booth, then pointed at the microphone sitting on the table in front of Stephen.

"Don't get too far away from the mike," he hissed, leaning forward. "You'll fade in and out."

Abruptly, he shoved himself away from the table, stretched back in his swivel chair, and stared up at the ceiling. "What kind of 'aesthetics' are you talking about here?" he asked.

"What I mean," Stephen replied, pulling the table-top mike closer to his mouth "is that people who know they are doomed have the right to develop their own cultural practices. Their own sense of beauty and life. That's what I help them do. To develop a new aesthetic. A new interpretation of the romantic sublime."

A second loud snort and a puffy cloud of smoke. The opposing man swiveled about rapidly in his chair, jerked himself toward the desk, and pulled down a microphone suspended above his head so that his lips nearly grazed the metal head. He spoke directly into it, gaining in volume as he snapped out his words.

"Okay, Beeeeantown," he began, "I've got Stephen Pallas with me here, self-admitted aider and abettor of suicides for people suffering from you-know-what, the Disease-of-the-Century, the Great Heterosexual Hope, yes, you've got it, AIDS! What do *you* think, Boston, about Mr. Pallas's self-appointed role as Grim Reaper? Is this a new opportunity for an outré drag act, or is the man a saint? Let me hear from you, Beeeantown, because I'm starting to feel sort of edgy sitting here alone with this guy, *if* you know what I mean. This is your early morning know-it-all on the *grrrreat* W-WAM, F. Trout Dracut."

He shoved the microphone away as though with distaste, then leaned over the desk. He wore a rumpled white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, exposing thick lower arms.

"Okay, Stephen, so what can you tell us about your service? How do you do it? How do you avoid arrest? How many poor infected souls have you ushered into that great bath-house in the sky? And are you listed in the yellow pages?"

Trout took a long pull on the cigar as once again silence spread through the room, diffusing through the air waves as dead air that mixed and thickened Boston's grey early morning fog, filling the cold front seats of commuter vehicles hurtling down Route 93, wrapping around tired housewives facing last night's dishes.

"I was hoping to be surprised," said the man in the suit. "But you are a bastard, after all."

"Come on now, Steve," retorted Trout, staring evenly at him across the table. "Let's not get ugly. This is your chance to raise some sympathy for your cause. Tug at the heartstrings. Appeal to the bleeding heart liberals. Heaven knows there's plenty of *them* in Boston, of all places. Go for it."

Stephen opened his mouth, but abruptly realized that Trout's words had a twisted sort of wisdom. Starting again, he spoke slowly, in a clear, calm voice.

"To answer your question about why I haven't been arrested, I can only give you my guesses. For one thing, assuming that the district attorney has heard about my services, I suppose she doesn't think she has enough hard

evidence to indict me. My friends who have committed suicide because of AIDS all have been lucid and physically strong enough to accomplish the act themselves. That makes it a lot harder to charge anyone who happens to be present at the time of death with complicity. Most of the people who have been charged with murder for euthanizing friends or relatives have killed people who were totally brain dead and living through life-support machines. There have been a lot of cases, most of them not even involving AIDS, as I'm sure you know. Another thing that probably keeps me out of prison," Stephen finished, "is that I haven't actually admitted to being present when someone has died."

"So do you care to tell us now?" Trout asked, leaning forward. "Have you seen your friends swallow the pills or hang themselves or whatever? Have you seen them die?"

Stephen noted that the ironic edge in the broadcaster's voice had disappeared. Brushing it off as the result of morbid curiosity, he continued. "I can't really answer the first question, except to say that what I try to do is show these people how to turn their willful deaths into a positive, cathartic experience, a *dignified* experience. Something that might do some good for others who are involved in the AIDS holocaust." He sat back in his chair and swallowed, knowing that his voice already sounded raspy with emotion. He didn't want this jerk interviewer to think he couldn't talk about AIDS without sobbing like a girl.

"In regard to your second question," he started slowly, "I sure as hell have seen them die. Dozens of them. But I don't mean that I've necessarily seen them draw their last breaths. I only mean that dying from AIDS is a long, painful process. Death comes from parasitic illnesses, like pneumonia. And I've seen that happen over and over, so many times I sometimes feel like I might die from it myself, just through despair."

He instantly regretted the final note of melodrama, expecting his last words to provoke another snort and a new cloud of foul smoke. But Trout's voice remained expressionless, with just a hint of genuine interest. His cigar lay neglected in a plastic ashtray the size of a dinner plate.

"Tell us something about these cathartic experiences. If I remember my class in ancient masterpieces at dear ol' B. U. correctly, a catharsis is something that an *audience* goes through, isn't it? Does that mean that you or others *watch* these suicides?"

"Your memory is correct," Stephen began. "A catharsis means to be moved outside of oneself by some spectacle that evokes pity and terror in the spectator. So *perhaps* I'm saying that I arrange for spectators to witness these deaths. At the least, I'm saying that I show my friends or clients how to use their suicides as a means of wish-fulfillment. They get to create a special moment, something memorable and beautiful and unique. In short, it's a type of fantasizing that wouldn't be possible if it weren't for the tragic inevitability of dying from AIDS.

"I think I see what you mean," Trout broke in. "You tell them 'If you've gotta go, do it in style.' Or, in other words, 'Death is a banquet and most poor sons of bitches are starving to death.'"

Stephen laughed, simultaneously stunned that this raving homophobe could draw any amusement from him.

"Well," he said, putting a hand to his loud tie, "I guess I'd rather be compared to Auntie Mame than to the Grim Reaper."

Trout laughed a bit, too, for the first time since the two men had sat down in the small booth. After giving Stephen a long, appraising stare, he suddenly reached for the overhead mike and snapped it down into position, preventing Stephen from seeing the expression on his face.

"Okay, Stephen, we've got mucho callers waiting." He hit a button on the small control console fitted into the table. "Boston, you're on the air at W-WAM with F. Trout Dracut. You've heard of the Starlight Foundation, right? The clan of Beverly Hills celebs who fulfill the wishes of doomed prepubescents in exchange for millions in free publicity? Well, my guest today, Stephen Pallas, answers the final requests of the moribund, too. In his own kinky way."

Trout gave his guest a broad stage-wink, making Stephen eject a quick nervous laugh against his will.

"Go ahead, caller," Trout said into the mike. "What do you want to ask Mr. Pallas?"

"Hi, Trout." A deep, booming voice filled the room. "This is Harry, your biggest fan."

"Harry!" Trout cried, with hyperbolic glee, reaching for his dormant cigar. "How's the phone company treating you, you ol' whistle-blower? What have you got to say this AM?"

"Okay, Trout, look. You know I'm no bigot or homophobic or anything like that, but I've gotta say that this Pallas guy should be locked up. Helping people commit suicide is still illegal in this country, and I don't care if they're dying from AIDS or his friends or boyfriends—or maybe *girl*friends I should say—or whatever the hell they are. We've got laws here."

"Do you want to respond to that, Mr. Pallas?" Trout asked, motioning at the headset sitting on the desk near Stephen. He quickly depressed a white console button and whispered: "Get your headset on, Stephen. The voices will come over the loudspeaker as well as the headphones, but you need the mike on your headset to talk to them clearly. Don't forget to talk directly into the disc. I've got our voices squelched right now. Hit it."

He made a pistol of one hand and pointed at Stephen, lifting his finger of the other hand from the button. "Mr. Pallas, my old buddy Harry here thinks you're committing a crime."

"Well," Stephen started, trying to swivel the tiny microphone closer to his mouth, "I've already spoken to that point, actually. But your caller must realize that assisting people to commit suicide is a very grey area in the law right now. Look at the doctor with the suicide machine. It took a long time before he was finally charged with a crime, and what I've done hasn't involved even that much direct involvement."

"Come on, Stephen," Trout interrupted, the querulous note back in his voice. "Can't you stop jerking us around here for two minutes and be *honest*? Harry doesn't want to hear your legalistic tap-dancing. "Hey, Boston!" he suddenly cried into the mike, assuming the yuck-yuck tone of a stand-up comic. "Wadda ya call a hundred lawyers in front of a firing squad? Give up? A good start! Ha!"

Imbecile, Stephen thought, watching Trout spin several full circles in his swivel chair. *Why did I ever want to do this?*

"Now, Steve, give us a break." Trout settled into position. "Can't you at least admit that you would *approve* of someone who assisted AIDS victims in offing themselves?"

"Of course I would," Stephen said. "Most people these days believe in death with dignity. Why should people dying of AIDS be treated any differently?"

"So long, Harry. We've got our next caller on the line," answered Trout, reaching to adjust a dial on the console. "What's your comment, pal?"

"Hi, Trout." This time the voice was a woman's, sounding firm and self-assured. "I work at a hospice for terminal patients in Brookline, and I want to say that your guest's actions are totally misconceived. I've seen lots of people die from AIDS and I know that even in the worst cases, the people suffering from AIDS-induced dementia and everything else, that they can truly enjoy life right until the end, if they're treated with love."

The voice grew harder as the woman proceeded.

"And I want to ask this guy what he means by referring to suicide as some type of audience sport. That sounds really sick to me, Trout. How do we know that he's not persuading people to kill themselves way before they're seriously ill, just to provide some kind of cheap thrill for him and his kinky friends? This sounds like sensationalism to me. Everyone knows that lots of gay men are into theater and melodrama and things like that. Mr. Pallas may be exploiting that. Now I'll hang up and listen to his answer."

Trout batted at the down-hanging microphone, then fixed Stephen with an even stare.

"Look, Stephen, let's get down to fundamentals about this suicide-as-audience-sport-thing. If you're paralyzed by fear of legal charges, could you perhaps explain how a *hypothetical* suicide of the type you *allegedly* would organize might *theoretically* take place?"

Stephen ground his teeth at the sneer in Trout's voice, cursing himself for letting himself think for even a second that this huckster might have some genuine compassion for people dying of AIDS. But he had to admit that he had come here to talk and that so far he hadn't done much more than evade the essential questions. He swallowed hard before speaking.

"Well," he began, "first let me say thanks to that caller. I hope she keeps working with AIDS victims and that she keeps showing them love."

He stroked his tie for several seconds, staring at the old clock, then began speaking.

"Okay, Trout, let's say there's a victim who loves the novel *Madame Bovary*. He sees it as the last dying breath of romanticism and as the herald of the triumph of consumer capitalism. In that novel, as you may remember from 'dear old' Boston U., Trout, a pivotal scene takes place during a ball at the grand château in the provincial city where Emma lives. It's the crowning moment in Emma's life. Love, beauty, status. All her dreams have come true."

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The house lights are dead, but from the far end of the empty theater, behind the heavy draperies, you sense life. Coming closer, stepping over rents and snags in the dusty carpeting, avoiding litter and trash strewing the aisle, you hear the first discordant notes of a violin being tuned. With a grand sweep, the drapes pull back, their unfurling edges licking at the smooth boards: hard yellow light pulsates against you like a sudden shower of snow. The first violin hits a piercing note, a last pause momentarily hangs in the auditorium's heavy

silence, and then the strings begin the bright first movement of Chopin's mazurka in C-sharp minor.

As the quartet reaches the end of the first piece, from both sides of the stage emerge hooped ball gowns of pink and cream and yellow. Above the deeply cut bodices ride narrow shoulders of powdered white. Other costumes follow them to fill the stage with a strange throng: black fishnet stockings below a red bustier edged with black lace and white bows; a nineteenth-century tuxedo with long, full tails; a pair of spurred jackboots with riding crop and shiny-visored SS cap; a flame-orange dashiki above which floats a tall, tightly wound red turban. Each of the costumes shares only one feature: it carries a large window pane in a wooden frame attached to a floor stand. Moving with ceremonial deliberation, the bearers form a semi-circle around the stage, each one placing its window on the shining hardwood floor.

The circle parts to admit one more dancer to the ball. She arrives in a wheelchair, pushed by a tall man. She sits with regal bearing as the attendant brings her to the center of the stage: her hair is black, swept upward from the neck and piled on top of her head, with a mass of ringlets framing the forehead. Her skin is the color of mahogany; the gloves that cover her arms to the biceps are ivory. As the chair silently advances, her blood-red dress sways in front of her like a great burden of roses.

Reaching the stage's center, the attendant retreats, even as the black tuxedo steps forward to where she waits. The instruments are tuned again as a gloved hand is extended toward her. The hand she reaches forth quavers slightly, but when it reaches the waiting open glove, she rises gravely from the chair in a single smooth motion. Her skirts rustle as the tuxedo's black sleeves reach around her. The quartet begins the préambule to Ravel's "Carnaval." The tuxedo's shining black boot steps forward. They dance.

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Stephen ignored a rolling hand gesture from Trout telling him to hurry up. He knew he was burning up precious call-in time, but this, he knew, was his chance to make people realize that what he did was not cruel or depraved.

"That night," he said, turning away from Trout and focusing on the lurching second-hand, "Emma dances with the aristocrat who is to become her lover. He will liberate her from her *petite-bourgeois* life of cheap romances and daydreams, but he will also bring her tragedy."

"This is very interesting, Stephen," said Trout witheringly. "But is there a point? My audience doesn't tune in for refresher courses on the European classics."

"The point," said Stephen, "is that my hypothetical client wanted to end his life by living this scene, by *being* Emma Bovary for a few minutes."

"So he was a drag queen?" asked Trout. "Or a transvestite?"

"He definitely wasn't a transvestite. And I don't know whether or not he did drag once in a while. I suppose he did, since he certainly knew how to make himself up. But whatever the case, he wanted to pose as a woman for this event. As Emma Bovary, to be exact."

"Didn't this Emma babe do herself in by eating arsenic?" Trout pursued, deliberately ignoring his director on the other side of the glass, who had been making violent rolling motions with both hands for nearly a full minute.

“Hey!” exclaimed Stephen, feeling some true mirth for the first time since taking his seat opposite Dracut. “You know the meaning of ‘catharsis’ *and* some Flaubert!”

“*I’ll* make the jokes around here, Stephen,” Trout replied. His tone was sour, but Stephen noted the smile twisting at the corners of his mouth.

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Emma dances, and the other costumes hasten to join her. Soon the stage is swirling with red and orange and Third Reich black and the sweet ingénue pastels. Partners change, Chopin fades into Mozart, and from off-stage a dozen men enter and take their places beside the framed windows. Each carries a small metal hammer with a rubber grip; each wears only a red tuxedo bow-tie and a metallic jockstrap of the same color. Emma turns, and the tuxedo sleeves are replaced by powerful naked arms ending in black gauntlets. She is carried along by them until she turns again, when the gauntlets change to white evening gloves. Once more she is borne away, her feet skimming above the boards, until finally the tuxedo claims her again. The dance goes on and on; the naked men beside the windows stand silently, flexing their grips on the rubber handles, waiting.

Suddenly, for the first time, a word pierces the high-pitched music. The man’s hoarse voice, his pain revealed for the first time in its grainy rasp, halts all motion and sound.

“I am too warm. I must stop,” she protests simply, raising her gloved hand to wipe beads of perspiration from her forehead.

Confusion. Expressions of concern. Vague gestures. At last, the tuxedo regains control. Stepping forward, one black arm waves a broad flourish, calling all to attention.

“Fracassez les fenêtres!” he shouts, his voice deep and steady. “Let Madame Bovary be refreshed! Let the dance continue!”

The first naked attendant draws back his hammer, taking careful aim at the window pane. For several seconds, as the dancers watch, he holds his pose, the small oblong muscles on the tops of his shoulders glinting in the light. Then he strikes, smashing the metal squarely into the center of the glass. Shards of glass shower the stage, pricking the soft amber candlelight into dazzling strands of silver. At the sound of shattering, the dancers shout their approval.

The tuxedo raises an elegant black arm and beckons to Emma. Breathless, she demurely approaches and takes her place within the waiting circle of arms.

The second attendant steps closer to his window. His shoulders draw back. He takes aim, pauses briefly, a sweat-oiled David—murmurs of approbation from the assemblage—and then he recoils. Hammer and genitals swing from right to left, and the window sprays its sharp diamonds into the air.

To the new strains of the “Mephisto Waltz,” Emma and her partner take their first dancing steps. Rocked gently in the arms of the music, Emma throws back her head and laughs. Like the sad notes sliding across the stage, her voice of man’s pain blends and flows with the silver light, catches upon the glassy starbursts, echoes lightly through the maze of ropes and pulleys and electrical cords that reach upward into the dead black areas of the theater. The oranges and pastels and blacks again are swirling. There is another aim, another

momentary frame of still, rippled muscle, a fresh bouquet of flying glass. Emma laughs again and again in silvery peals as the tuxedo yields to the naked arms and the naked arms are replaced by the evening gloves.

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"Can we cut to the chase, Stephen? How did this dance end in suicide? Or is that asking you to be too crass?"

"Not at all," Stephen replied. "After my client completed Emma's dance, he gave himself an overdose of Percodan. That's all."

"You're on, caller," Trout barked into the mike. "Mr. Pallas, Impresario of Death, is waiting to talk to you."

"Look, you pervert," the voice started with a vigorous rush. Stephen steeled himself. "I say more power to you if you help every homo in Boston bite the big one. You know what AIDS stands for to me? It means 'Adios, infected dick-suck'—"

"Whoa—*ho*!" shouted Trout gaily. "Sorry, pal, can't have any of *that* on a wholesome kids show!" He flipped a switch, muffling the mike with his other hand and leaning over to whisper to Stephen. "There's a ten second transmission delay. That didn't get onto the air."

"Next caller!" he said loudly, removing his hand.

"Mr. Pallas?" The voice was barely audible, as though muffled by cotton. "If you've been telling the truth, and if you're not some stooge set up by the rancid Mr. Dracut"—the host put his hand to his heart, feigning hurt for the amusement of the crew outside the booth—"then I think you deserve a lot of credit. But I know what you're dealing with from my own experiences, because I've helped two friends to end their suffering. One of them was my life partner. I even think I know some people who have . . . worked with you, if you'd call it that. And I want to tell you something. Even if your intentions are good, what you are doing is dangerous. Something could go wrong."

"What do you mean, caller?" Trout brayed, sucking on his cigar. "That Stephen here might swallow some mean little pills himself?"

"No." The word was spat into Stephen's ears. "You wouldn't understand what I mean, you moron. But Mr. Pallas might."

Trout snorted with impatience, then punched a button, switching to another call.

But Stephen was unable to focus on the new voice that filled his ears. He sat frozen, pondering, detached from Trout and the studio and the sharp, accusatory tones that poked at his privacy from automobiles and bedside tables. On the expressways of Boston, morning rush hour was ending. Feeble sunlight was fighting off the early fog. Having survived icy roads yet again, commuters sighed with relief as they coasted down exit ramps, gauging their speed carefully to avoid red lights. In a small broadcasting station near the heart of the city, his fingertips nearly touching F. Trout Dracut's hairy forearms, Stephen fiddled with the knot of his garish necktie, unwilling to relinquish his sudden need to think.

"Hey! You still with us?"

Stephen jumped, jarred to attention by Trout's relentlessly raucous voice.

"I think I know what that caller meant," he said at last, ignoring the questioning look that Trout fixed upon him.

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She pivots once more on the satin toe of her evening pump; her brown arms stretch forth for the answering embrace of her next partner. Then she freezes as she turns to face the grand ball's newest arrival. Bald head, gleaming torso strapped within a leather X bearing a silver death's head at the center. Emma has time to gasp only once before the knife is drawn and raised with ceremonial flourish. Before she can move, it plunges downward and buries itself to the hilt in her heart. She falls gracefully, sinking into the folds of her gown like a lightning-struck windjammer collapsing into the stormy billows of a red sea. Immediately, several dancers spread a large plastic tarpaulin on the floor while others, their evening gloves and gauntlets now covered with plastic surgical gloves, lift the prone form carefully and lay it upon the waiting white tarp.

The man in the tuxedo bends on one knee beside the body, carefully avoiding the blood that now flows freely from the wound. "Let this be your winding sheet, Emma," he whispers. And then he stands and exits the stage, not looking back.

Slowly, the others gather around the body, staring downward at the widening red pool spreading from the wound. On their faces is fixed a strange visage of relief and enthrallment. The executioner stands at the body's head, still holding the knife at the end of this outstretched arms. Three drops of blood drip slowly onto Emma's oval face, which she seems to acknowledge when a pinkish froth of saliva and blood bubbles up from her mouth.

Finally, one dancer steps forward. After a moment, he removes the glove on his right hand, then, in a quick motion, bends over and touches his index finger at the fountain of blood rhythmically pumping from Emma's heart. As he withdraws his finger, one of the pastel dancers screams shrilly, and promptly faints into the arms of those nearest.

"The blood," says the man, raising his hand for all to see his stained finger. "The blood," he says again.

The dancer next to him repeats the word, then the next, until the word flows around the ring like the blood from the still-beating heart, until the theater echoes with the refrain "The blood, the blood." From the deserted wings, the tuxedo-clad dancer surveys the crowd, listening to the plaintive anthem. From the darkness behind him another man emerges, who quietly places his hand on his shoulder. The man in the tuxedo turns and eagerly embraces the late arrival, his strong arms tightly wrapping around the other man's shoulders. When they part, they stand and watch the dancers, who now are choosing partners again, stepping carefully around the blood-soaked figure in the middle of the stage.

The new man puts his lips to the ear of his companion and whispers softly "Are you still sure about this?"

But the man in the antique tuxedo says nothing in reply. Instead, he continues to gaze at the reanimating swirl of silk and leather and hard naked skin.

"Thank *you*, caller. I'm sure if Mr. Pallas sees the light and wants to join you in restoring the Aryan race to its rightful supremacy, that he'll manage to find you in whatever rat-infested sewer you happen to be inhabiting at the time.

“And that wraps up today’s show, friends and lovers! Be here tomorrow or be square, Beeeeantown. This is your humble and compassionate servant, F. Trout Dracut, the guy you hate to love, on the *grrrrreat* W-WAM, signing off.”

With one hand, Trout knocked away the microphone; with the other, he tore off his headset and threw it clattering down the length of the formica-top table.

“Go ahead and strip down, Stephen,” he said. “The light’s off.”

Repeating Trout’s zeal, Stephen ripped off the combination mike and headphones and let them fall onto the table. Suddenly, an hour’s worth of pent-up anger, of repressed hatred, flooded into every extremity of his body, making his fingertips tremble like fine wires as he reached for his topcoat and briefcase. He wanted out of the studio, to be outside in the autumn chill, free, anywhere but in the same room as Trout Dracut.

“Not a bad show, Stephen,” Trout commented, stretching back in his reclining swivel chair and stretching his arms at full length. You fielded the nut-cases really well, for a rookie.”

“Thanks for nothing,” Stephen growled, standing up.

“What’s your hurry? Sit down. Look.” Trout jabbed at a glowing red button on the console before him, changing it to green. “The crew outside can’t hear us now.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Stephen exploded. “You think we’re going to make small talk now? You’re a creep, a scumbag! The show’s over, and I’m leaving.”

“A show on which I personally booked you, pal,” Trout laconically observed. “After you wrote me five letters pestering me with charges of discrimination against homosexuals. And over the protests, I might add, of my producer and the station’s lawyers.”

As he talked, he re-rolled his shirt sleeves, not looking at Stephen. “Lighten up. You got your share of supportive calls. You got your message out. If you feel angry, remember that the people who want to see you boiled in oil are ten times more likely to call in than the people who approve of what you’re doing.”

“If you had it your way,” Stephen shot back, “no one would approve of what I do. Or of what I am.”

Trout patted one sleeve into place above the elbow, then reached his arms above his head, joined hands, and began shifting his shoulders from one side to another. “Shit,” he said. “I always have a mother tension knot in the small of my back after a show.”

Watching Trout indulging in stress-control, Stephen became acutely conscious of the several people on the other side of the glass panel, a couple of whom were idly watching the tableau he and Trout were making. “Look,” he blurted out, trying to keep the shake in his voice under control. “What you say is probably true. It means a lot to me that some of the people expressed sympathy. And I do appreciate your putting me on the show, even if you only did it to provoke your faithful ‘nut-cases,’ as you call them. But I did my honest best on your show and now I just want to leave. I’ve known enough fag-hating pigs like you to know that we have nothing to say to each other.”

Trout straightened up in his chair, staring levelly at Stephen. Something in his eyes prevented Stephen from turning on his heel and leaving, as he

wanted to do: a hint of some emotion that Stephen had not sensed throughout the preceding hour.

"Stephen," Trout finally said, "I think I may be disappointed in you, after all."

"In *me*?" Stephen asked, incredulous. "Why? You've known what I am all along."

"That's right," Trout said. "And I thought you were the type of man who appreciates a good act."

Perplexed, Stephen nervously put his hand to his necktie, watching a smile slowly lift the corners of Trout's mouth.

"Stephen," Trout said, "there's something I've been wanting to tell you all morning."

"What?" Stephen asked dumbly, realizing as his front teeth clicked shut that his mouth had actually been hanging open.

"I love that tie."

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When Trout suggested a restaurant for dinner, Stephen knew he had chosen it for its privacy. And for its straight patrons. It had been years since he had gone out with a man who kept his sexual orientation secret, but he remembered well the semiotics of passing for straight.

"Shit," he murmured under his breath as he gave Trout's name to the maître d'. "I must be out of my mind. I wonder how long it will be before he says in a firm, no-nonsense voice that he's bisexual, but not gay."

Trout was already waiting at the table, seated comfortably and gazing out a window on his left. Approaching him, Stephen reluctantly admitted that Trout hardly looked like an uptight closet case, or a purveyor of shock radio. He was dressed in quiet style, looking somewhat professorial in a non-nerdy way. His clean profile showed high cheekbones and a sharp nose that was just a shade too long.

He needs a shave, Stephen thought, as the waiter handed him a menu. *And I like that.*

Trout turned to face him squarely and said, "There's one thing I want to tell you right up front, Stephen."

For Pete's sake! Stephen shouted to himself. *At least wait until the appetizers!*

"What's that, Mr. Dracut?" he asked calmly, picking up his water glass.

"I'm not bisexual. I'm just as gay as you are and damn proud of it."

After the waiter and a disgruntled busboy had cleared away the dishes and replaced the soaked table linen, Stephen discovered that Trout had several more secrets.

"Look," Trout expounded over baked crab, occasionally pointing his fork at Stephen for emphasis. "I fully understand if you have no respect for what I do. But try to look at it this way. I got my start out west, working in real shock radio. You think I pander to the screwballs now? You should have heard me when I worked in Las Vegas. The calls I get here in Boston are like scolding from Mother Therese, compared to what I got in Vegas. Almost every caller wanted to see at least one minority group escorted to the death camps immediately. Vegas is full of vacationing white supremacists from Utah, you

know; not to mention boozed-up rednecks from every corner of the country. People like that get mean when they lose the nest egg at the blackjack table, Stephen. You've never heard anything like the bile those guys—I mean women, too—spew forth. That was when I was coming out of the closet."

Stephen's mouth twisted in a wry smile at Trout's last words, which prompted Trout to toss down his fork. He swallowed a mouthful of crab, regarding Stephen warily before he spoke again.

"Okay, okay. I know what you're thinking. Maybe I'm still in the closet, according to your definition. But after my show started to catch on in Vegas, I felt trapped. For two years I felt like a total hypocrite, taking calls from every kind of racist you can imagine. Sure, I thought about telling the truth. I had fantasies about doing it right on the air, right in the face of some hate-filled bigot."

He leaned across the table, lowering his voice, but speaking more urgently.

"You know what that would have gotten me? Fired, that's what. And nothing else. But I finally realized that I could do my share for the cause by working on the inside, by playing the game their way. I could keep giving the racists and the homophobes and the neo-Nazis and the misogynists their own custom-made forum and at the same time give exposure to people like you. And someday, when the time's right, I'll tell the full truth."

"What's wrong with now?" Stephen asked.

"You know damn well what would happen if I went public now. The station would tear up my contract before I could attend my first ACTUP meeting. There are damn good reasons, you know, why not one single celebrity has ever come out of the closet. Not a fucking one."

"That's not strictly true," Stephen remarked, "but I'll admit they're scarcer than hen's teeth. And I think a sea change may be coming soon on that issue. Even if I'm wrong, maybe the scarcity of gay celebs is a *good* reason for you to take the plunge. Even good for your career." He lifted his wine to his lips with exaggerated caution. "See what happens."

"Don't get noble on me," Trout replied. Stephen was surprised to see the color rising in Trout's cheeks, and to hear his voice trembling slightly. "You think you're on safe moral ground and I'm a coward, don't you? But if you really want to know, I do my share of suffering, too. You have a whole community you feel safe in. Imagine how you would feel if you had no gay friends, or if you couldn't ever go to a bar and just hang out, much less hope to meet someone."

Stephen shrugged, feeling that Trout had his defenses too well worked out to be shown any other perspectives, but he admitted to himself that this guy he had called a scumbag a few hours earlier probably deserved a reconsideration. He had heard stories like Trout's before. Some of them had even come from men who later turned out to be his friends. He didn't want to condemn Trout unfairly, as many of the people in his circle of friends would do. After all, when he had worked as a counselor on a gay hotline, he had always made a point of telling his co-workers, most of them politically active, not to be judgmental with callers who were still too frightened to open up.

Trout opened his mouth to say more, then seemed to think better of it, and through the appetizers and most of the main course, they ate in silence. Chewing mouthfuls of scallops and pasta, Stephen consciously restrained himself from looking too frequently at Trout, for the fine lines he had noticed

around the man's dark eyes seemed more and more attractive as the wine glasses were replenished. As the coffee arrived, Trout finally spoke again, his voice deep and low.

"When I finally got you booked for the show, I hoped you'd turn out to be someone likeable. Someone I could talk to. Not a saint or a fanatic."

"And not too femme?" Stephen queried, watching the wet snowflakes of an unscheduled storm through the curtained window on his right. "Someone who can pass for straight? A guy you can take to the gym with you, maybe go skiing with for the weekend?"

"You just can't look at it any way but your own, can you?" Trout asked. A note of sudden weariness was in his voice, and the tremble had spread to his hands. He abruptly let his cup clatter into the saucer. "Does your compassion extend only to your friends who take the politically safe course and dedicate their whole lives to the right causes? Some of those people are scumbags too, you know. I've interviewed dozens of them. Ever heard of HWA, Homosexuals for a White America? Ever heard of the Man/Boy Love Association? Those are the outright lunatics, but plenty of the more respectable types are just as bad. You're different, Stephen . . . or at least I thought you were."

He resolutely turned his head to watch the snow, sighing heavily. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, after all," he muttered. Then, gruffly: "Can't even have a fucking cigarette in this chi-chi place."

Stephen sat still, thinking that maybe, right at the end of Trout's rationalizing, he had detected a note of something genuine in the man's voice: misery. Intrigued, Stephen allowed himself to appraise the man unabashedly as he watched the snow, which now was being driven against the window by howling gusts of wind. He guessed that Trout was about thirty-five, although he looked no older than his late twenties. His dark brown hair—lighter than the hair on his arms, Stephen now noted—was still thick on top, but brushed straight back from the temples, as though to flaunt the slight but certain sign of middle-aged retreat. Above the ears, grey filaments generously mixed with the chestnut. His eyes, Stephen marked in surprise for the first time, were cold blue. He pondered the enigma Trout presented. Stephen had known his share of self-deluded men who called themselves bisexual, but not too many grown men who called themselves gay and saw themselves as fulfilling a purpose by remaining in the closet. He recalled that during the radio show Trout had actually said very little—maybe nothing—that was homophobic. And he had pulled the plug on a few of the more aggressive calls. Undoubtedly, Trout was partly just another scared closet case. A self-deluded shirker. But maybe he really could change. Perhaps he deserved the benefit of a doubt.

A violent blast of wind rattled the window in its frame, breaking Stephen's reverie.

"Cheer up," he said in a bright voice, reaching out his hand, making a fist, and tapping Trout on the knuckles, as though knocking on a door.

"What for?" Trout asked gravely, not turning his head.

"Come on, Trout. Look at me," Stephen answered. "Don't be so miserable, even though you can't smoke at my place, either."

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Stephen read the eight words one more time: “Can’t see you again. Will explain later. Sorry.” He crumpled the single sheet of yellow legal paper into a ball, hurled it at the empty air, then kicked an ottoman. It screeched across the floor until it collided with a small table holding a lead crystal lamp given to him by the man he had lived with for seven years. Stephen watched, paralyzed, as the lamp teetered in ludicrous slow motion until it stopped, momentarily defied gravity, then fell to the hardwood floor and smashed into pieces.

“Shit!” he yelled, knocking his head with the heel of his hand. “Shit! You bastard, F. Trout Dracut!”

He ran into the bathroom, weirdly alien to all the familiar objects and doorways he passed. Slapping the water on, he plunged his head beneath the stream. Into the water cascading from his mouth, he burbled “What a jerk I am!”

When the phone rang, he let the machine pick up, not caring who it was. But as he toweled off his face and shoulders, the excited voice of his best friend caught his attention.

“Stephen?” The filtered voice sounded strangely small and distant. “It’s Randall. I know you’re there. Pick up.”

There was a long waiting moment before the voice spoke again. Stephen stood perfectly still in the bathroom, dumbly gazing at his reflection, feeling again that even his own image was new and strange.

“Okay, just listen. I’ve known for days who your new ‘friend’ is, Steve, even though you wouldn’t tell me his name. I’ll tell you later how I found out. But if you’re not listening to his show now, turn it on. He’s talking to Jeffrey. And call me as soon as you can about tonight. There’s still a lot for us to do before we get started.”

Without thinking, Stephen left the bathroom and awkwardly walked down the hall, his legs and arms refusing to move in their ordinary ways. Reaching the stereo, he lifted a shaking hand and clumsily switched it on.

“So exactly how many ‘relationships’ did you have altogether, caller?”

Stephen abruptly crumpled onto the sofa, felled by the sudden cut of Trout’s taunting voice.

“I don’t know,” the caller replied in a choke. “Maybe twenty who really meant something to me. But there were lots of others that I only spent one night with. Or even only a few minutes. Denver can be a crazy place when you’re just coming out.”

“Twenty?” Trout’s voiced boomed. “You had twenty boyfriends and a slew of one-nighters? Just out of prurient interest, Jeffrey, where would you place your total for sexual encounters of all types?”

“Shit,” Jeffrey balked. “What difference does it make? I called because I wanted—”

“I don’t care what you wanted!” Trout nearly shrieked. “It makes a difference! That’s the problem with you people. You think there’s no difference between normality and screwing everything with a pulse. There is a difference, Jeff, so tell me how many or I’ll kill this call!”

“A couple hundred, anyway,” the miserable voice answered. “At least that many. But over three years.”

“Three whole years!” Trout shouted in mock relief. Stephen could picture him hamming it up for the derision of his technicians. At the thought, his stomach heavily turned over.

“What slowed you down, Jeff? Was that the time of Denver’s infamous lubricant shortage?”

Stephen heard an enormous sniffle over the radio; when the caller spoke again, his barely audible voice had a syrupy sound.

“You’re really crazy today, Trout. I only called because you sounded halfway sympathetic a couple weeks ago when you interviewed that guy who helps AIDS victims commit suicide.”

“‘Victims,’” Trout returned, fondling the word in a new, contemplative tone. “Let’s talk about the politics of victimhood, Jeffie. Just what the hell makes you a ‘victim,’ anyhow?” Intensity grew as Trout continued. Stephen clutched a pillow and writhed on his sofa.

“You’re no victim,” Trout said with infinite disgust. “You knew AIDS was out there, but that didn’t stop you from hopping in the sack with half the western world for a few minutes of thrills. The victims of this disease, Jeffie, are the babies who get born to women who are just as corrupt as you are and the poor bastards in Africa who don’t have enough education to know how to avoid the virus and the patients who get infected from their doctors who perform operations but who are really hiding in the damned closet.”

Trout’s last word crackled through the air as he reached a crescendo, jerking at Stephen’s body like the strings on a marionette. But his tirade was not over. He drew an audible gulp and continued.

“You know what you are, Jeff? What you are is a plain old slut. Just another greedy jerk who chose to screw his way into the grave and who now wants good, honest people to cry for him because his mom and dad kicked him out. You know what I say? Good for your parents!”

“No!” Stephen yelled, thrashing so hard with his arms and legs that he fell off the sofa. One elbow cracked hard on the floor, making him gasp in pain.

“I didn’t get it because I was a slut, even if that’s what I was,” Jeffrey shot back, baited. “AIDS kills people who have sex once a year. It strikes arbitrarily. And if you weren’t such an idiot, you’d—”

“Oh it’s arbitrary, huh?” Trout yelled back, his voice like a slap in the face. “Where did you hear that slogan? Same place where you heard that we heterosexuals should love you gays who got us all into this mess? What I should have the guts to say here is ‘you faggots,’ because that’s the right word.”

“You bastard!” Stephen howled, scrambling to his hands and knees.

“You’re wrong!” Jeffrey choked out.

But nothing stopped Trout’s diatribe.

“Not all you guys are faggots, but some of you are. The ones who throw their self-respect and morals to hell when they ‘come out’; the ones who think that acknowledging that they’re gay is like discovering they’ve got stigmata; the ones who think that desecrating the eucharist is brave and righteous and politically correct. The ones like you, in short, Jeff my pal. And I for one don’t feel one little bit of remorse at seeing you guys go to your well-deserved deaths. In your case, AIDS is killing the right people.”

Stephen leapt to his feet and lurched toward the voice. Trying to focus through a blinding watery haze, he reached for the component and jerked it off the shelf, sending bric-a-brac and tape cassettes flying in all directions. But as he raised it above his head, Jeffrey spoke again. This time, the voice was dry and even. Stephen froze.

"You smug pig," Jeffrey started. "You think you're safe and that you've got all your racist supporters on their side, don't you? But I've got your number, Dracut. I know what you're doing and who you're doing it with. I know that—"

"You know nothing, faggot!" Trout bellowed, but Stephen thought he heard, for the first time, a note of uneasiness. "You're gone! You're history! I'm pulling your plug right now. Pray that someone does the same for you when you're lying in a puddle of your own waste!"

Wailing an incomprehensible curse, Stephen let his missile fly. It hit the wall just above the sofa, wiping out three small framed paintings. He gasped a high-pitched, jittery laugh at the sight, but as the room filled with new silence, the hysterical laughter and the shaking in his muscles slowly stopped. Light was beginning to flood into the windows facing him, making him think about the coming day. And the night that would follow.

The phone rang again, and this time he snatched up the receiver without pausing.

"Stephen?" It was Randall again. "Man, I'm glad you answered. What the hell is going on? Dracut sounded like a maniac and—"

"Skip it," Stephen said. As he talked, he reached for a bottle of brandy, then clamped the cap between his teeth and wrenched the bottle hard. "I'll tell you about Dracut later. We need to talk about the celebration tonight."

"Yeah, I know. Alex and Tom have been rounding up all the props on your list, but they're having trouble—"

Stephen impatiently cut him off again. "Don't worry about that stuff now. I'll meet you at the usual place in an hour and we can talk it over. I need to think for a few minutes."

"Think about what? Isn't everything set?"

Stephen scarcely heard the question as he took a long pull on the brandy, swallowing slowly so that the burn reached all the way from his mouth to the pit of his stomach. As he drank, he regarded the smashed receiver, sitting lopsidedly on the couch.

"About tonight," he finally said, speaking carefully into the phone. "I want to make some last-minute changes in the scenario.

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As the drapes recede, you first see a full yellow moon suspended at the back of the stage: the moon's wan light spreads a comforter across a four-poster bed seated at stage center, gently illuminating the face of a sleeping boy. His red lips are pursed in an expression of sweet, sleepy fulfillment; his black hair falls in damp curls across his high forehead. The fleecy counterpane is pulled close to his chin, making his youthful face seem to float on the white pillow like a paper ship on a friendly sea. In the profound silence, you can almost hear his peaceful breathing. Despite the dark, you can see the rhythmic swelling of his breast against the quilt.

Behind the bed, double French windows reach to the ceiling, beyond which rides the moon. As you watch, plumes of smoke begin to drift lazily across the panes, caressing the glass in silent, searching streamers. Your eyes adjust to the dark and you see more: each poster of the bed is crowned with a wreath of burgeoning white flowers; another is thrown across the bed at the feet of the sleeping boy. The coils of fog continue licking restlessly at the glass,

just as the slight, musty odor of garlic reaches where you sit in the theater, transfixed.

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"I watched *Spartacus* again with him last night," Randall said, walking shoulder-to-shoulder with Stephen. "He cried right from the credits."

"Why *Spartacus*, of all things?" Stephen asked, stopping at a bench and sweeping away its load of snow with one arm. He motioned for Randall to sit.

"I don't know. I bitched to him once that the Olivier character is the worst kind of stereotype of a pederast, but he didn't care. I guess he can't let go of some need he has for socially-acceptable male bonding. He loves the scene where Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtiss fight to the death, after the slave rebellion has failed, and the victor will be crucified. The Curtiss character refuses to let Spartacus win, because crucifixion was so painful and ignominious. When Spartacus killed Tony Curtiss and they both said 'I love you' to each other as Curtiss died, he just lost it altogether. Talked a lot about how he couldn't bear to leave his son. But I think it helped. After it was over, he said he was ready for tonight, and that he doesn't have any doubts."

"I suppose it didn't hurt," Stephen said, after a pause, "that Douglas and Curtiss are stripped to the waist in that scene."

The two men laughed, sitting on a bench on the edge of the Frog Pond in Boston Common. Overnight, another unexpected snow flurry had grown into a near-blizzard, covering the Common with a white shroud of heavy snow in the early morning hours. Now, at noon, the temperature was rising and the snow abating. But Stephen felt a coldness that his heavy wool coat could not protect him from.

The two sat in silence for a while, regarding the flocks of pedestrians walking carefully along the slippery sidewalk in the direction of the State House. With the season's first cloaking of snow, the world seemed quieter, despite the noise of traffic.

"You want to talk about Dracut?" Randall finally asked, hesitantly.

"No," Stephen answered flatly. "Not yet."

"You want to know how I found out?"

Stephen brushed away the snow accumulating on his shoulders. Unwanted, an image of Trout's face formed in his mind. Stephen saw him saying good-bye after their last night together. Everything had seemed normal, as routine as anything could be after a mere two weeks of knowing someone. Pausing in the doorway, glancing from one side to another to see if anyone were watching them, Trout had winked at him in the comical way that Stephen had come to enjoy, with both eyes at once.

"See you tomorrow" he had said. "Listen to my show."

With a start, Stephen suddenly realized that Trout must have left the note in his mailbox as he left the apartment house that night. Had he written it standing in the hallway? Or had he gone someplace, maybe a bar, and decided to end the affair? Or perhaps, Stephen thought, the note had already been written when Trout arrived at Stephen's apartment that night. Was it folded and hidden in the pocket of his trousers as they lay in a heap on the floor in Stephen's bedroom? The last possibility made Stephen feel a cold dampness in the small of his back.

“See you tomorrow.”

With an effort, Stephen jerked himself back to Randall’s question.

“No,” he said. “No, I don’t want to know right now. Let’s go over tonight’s event one more time.

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A shadow crosses the luminescent white face. The steady breathing of sleeping innocence becomes shallow, troubled. His nostrils widen as he struggles for air, pushing in agitation at the heavy covers that enclose him, as though searching for relief from suffocating heat. Behind the window, the mists have receded, leaving the stark moon again in view. For an instant, it hangs cleanly in the sharp black night. Then a form appears: a black cape, the face hidden by a high collar, the towering figure of a man. He is suspended in the window, his feet at the level of the boy’s head, as if he had sprung from his mind. From far in the distance, the lonely howl of a wolf steals upon the scene.

The youth’s distress grows extreme. Both hands flail at the pillows and covers as he twists in outlandish paroxysms, clawing at the loose collar of the white shirt that reaches to his knees. Suddenly, he half-rises and flings back the quilt and sheets, then unleashes all his strength to hurl the festoons of noxious flowers away from the bedstead. In frenzied exhaustion, he then throws himself back upon the pillows, panting as though in fever, the white skin of his limbs shimmering in an envelope of thick sweat.

The high windows open and swing slowly inward. The dark intruder, his face obscured by a tendril of mist, springs gracefully from the casement to the floor. Silently he stands, observing his prey. You cannot see his eyes, but you can feel their cold onyx cold as he appraises the body spread before him in helpless wanting.

The boy slowly turns his head. As his eyes fall upon the sinister guest, a wrenching sigh of relief and longing shudders through his trembling body. He lies back, calmed, in a tremor of expectation, his eyes fixed upon the stranger. He now moves quickly. With a jerk on the tie at his throat, the cape falls to the floor, exposing his naked chest, a solid square of white that rudely gleams in the wavering light. His right hand crosses his heart to the right pectoral. He extends one finger. There is a short, precise gesture, and a thin slant of crimson oozes into the vague darkness.

From the watchers outside the bed chamber, from the vast darkness encircling the stage, a single voice says clearly “The blood.”

The captive boy rises to his knees on the bed, turning to face the man, who now steps closer to the bedside. Without warning, he reaches for the boy with both arms. With one hand, he pulls brutally at the loose shirt, ripping it away from the shaking frame with a loud tearing sound. With the other arm, he encircles the boy’s waist, jerking him forward until the black mass of curls is pressed against his own chest, into the thin slant of blood. The boy clutches with one hand at the dark man’s shoulders, his head moving against the broad white chest.

Close to where you sit, you hear someone shout “Bravo!” You almost speak yourself, but the spectacle on stage, the young boy’s gently curving thigh as he leans into his fearsome lover, holds you speechless. Finally, as though in utter disdain, the man tosses aside his prey. In turn, the boy, sated, stretches

back on the sheets in luxury, rolling his head back and forth, heedless of the ragged stain of red that spreads from his face to the spotless white pillowcases.

"The blood!" shouts another voice. At once, the chorus begins, the throaty voices ringing through the theater like a bell's peals in an empty church. The boy's eyes flutter shut as sleep suffuses his body. With his last strength, he runs his fingertips his across his body, dragging narrow trails of red from his mouth to his navel. Then the hands fall still and drop at this sides.

The man steps forward and kneels upon the edge of the bed, reaching to his boot as he moves. Quickly, he retracts the silver knife. He raises it high, grasping the hilt in a double-fisted grip. He turns the point downward, poising it directly above the prostrate figure sprawled in the bloodied linen.

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"So everything checks out the same as before," Randall commented. "What are the changes you said you wanted to make?"

"I don't know what the hell I was thinking about when I said that," Stephen answered, standing up from the bench and shaking snow from his shoulders. "Forget that. But I did think about the whole thing again, and I made a decision." He turned to face Randall, his jaw grimly set. "I don't want to act in our little play tonight," he said calmly. "You can play my part. And this is the last event I organize. I'm through."

"What?" Randall protested, jumping to his feet. "You can't be serious! We need you!"

"I don't care," Stephen said, turning away and beginning to walk across the Common, Randall awkwardly dogging his footsteps. "Something's happened. Something's changed recently with the suicides. You've seen it. There's something new in the spirit behind our playlets now; something I don't like. It's gone too far, or maybe it's run its course. I don't know. I still believe in the idea as it was when we started, but now it seems too . . ."

"Too what?" Randall insisted.

"Too high in potential for something disastrous to happen. For someone to get hurt."

Randall grabbed him by the shoulder to halt his rapid walk.

"That's not what your problem is, Stephen," he said, vainly trying to make Stephen to look at him. "This has something to do with Dracut."

"Maybe it does," Stephen replied, twisting away from his friend's grasp. "But I've been thinking about it for a long time, and my mind is made up."

"What about your responsibility to Tim tonight?" Randall persisted. "We can't ask him to change his mind or delay it! What about all the others who've already talked to us?"

"I won't cop out tonight," Stephen answered, "but this is my last one. And afterward, I don't want to hear anything more about them. I mean it, Randall."

Randall stepped closer, crowding into Stephen's face. "You can't be serious, man! You're the key person here! You started all this and now you just want—"

"I don't care!" Stephen shouted, roughly shoving Randall away and stepping past him. "It's over! I've done nothing but work for this cause for years, and I can't take it!"

He suddenly stopped and turned again to face Randall. As he talked, his voice shaking, he walked backward in long, uneven steps, gesturing wildly in the snow-tossed air.

"You see what I mean, Randall? I'm drained! I don't have anything more to give, not to you or anybody else! You know what Trout did for me? He made me realize something simple: there are people in the world who aren't dying of AIDS! Can you imagine anyone *forgetting* that? Well, *I did*!" With his last words, he lost his footing. Both legs swung forward and he thudded wetly onto the sidewalk. In an instant, he was up again, half-laughing, wiping at his nose with a gloved hand.

"I'm through!" he repeated. "I'll see you tonight, then it's over! For good!" He turned and set out at a near-run down a snow-bordered path, slipping to the ground again with his first step. Nearing the Common's corner at the intersection of Beacon and Park Streets, he paused for a moment to calm his heavy, ragged breathing. Unanticipated, a great surge of well-being began to swell through his body, making his fingertips tingle in the cold air. Feeling as though an enormous change were sweeping through him, he pressed his eyes shut, trying to focus on the unexpected sensation. When he opened them again, he saw that brightness had replaced the glowering clouds of morning. He turned his face up, letting the sunlight confuse his vision.

"Stephen!"

When he heard Randall's voice again, he hurriedly stepped forward into the throng of foot traffic, wanting to lose himself in the crowd. But he was too late to escape his friend's final words, plucking at him from behind like an unwanted street beggar.

"It may not be that easy, Stephen."

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In a final flourish, the heavy, tattered drapes swing shut, blocking your view of the pathetic boy and his strange intruder. Even as the drapes still sway gently, a man steps forward. Addressing the crowd, he says that tonight the tableau vivant has a second scene. And he disappears again.

A pause, then questions are shouted from the darkness: "What do you mean, a second act? Why?" You feel uncertainty, alarm, begin to spread through the audience.

As if in answer, the drapes again swing open, revealing the stage brilliantly illuminated. After the gentle shadows of the dead boy's bedchamber, you shield your eyes against the barrage. A procession enters from the left. First, the leather-clad executioner, striding in ritual pomp. Next enter two masked men dressed in black tights and jerseys. Before them they push a hospital gurney that bears the dead man, his body covered to the neck with a sheet. One starkly white arm hangs limply beneath the cover, an intravenous tube inserted into the wrist that runs to a small round bottle attached to one leg of the cart. It is filled with dark blood.

Next come two more attendants, also masked, guiding a wheeled platform. Upon it sits an odd structure: a metal cage, tall enough to hold a human, curtained in black on all four sides. As it trundles into position at the center of the stage, it shakes violently. You hear metal rattling against the slender iron bars.

Nervous laughter from the audience. “Is that an ape?” someone shouts. “A lion?” cries another excited voice.

But those on the stage say nothing as the men steering the cage prepare to unveil it. Silence recaptures the audience as both men take one curtain in each hand. Suddenly, they jerk down the curtains, pulling them through the bars with the bravado of cheap magicians, exposing the cage’s contents to the view of the insatiable watchers. A stunned silence falls upon the audience, followed quickly by a loud intake of breath.

The man stands with his hands above his head, crossed at the wrists, handcuffed to a horizontal bar. He is stripped to the waist, his back turned to face the audience. The tan, healthy skin of his broad back, the heavy diagonal muscles in his upstretched arms, are an incongruity against the landscape of white and black. As the curtains fall to the floor, he gives the bars a titanic shake, making the theater clang with iron.

The watchers, momentarily mesmerized, now roar their approval. But as the attendants rotate the cage on its wheels to bring the man’s face within their gaze, the acclaim ceases. They stare, disbelieving, drinking in the helpless terror that floods the man’s gaping eyes as he sees the congregation before him. Then they rise, shouting, leaving their seats, rushing to be closer to the stage. They scramble and push to stand at the edge, beating their hands upon the hard wood, drowning out the banging of the man’s handcuffs as he desperately pulls against them over and over again. One black form on stage opens the cage’s door; another steps upon the platform and deftly removes a rubber gag from the chained man’s mouth. Then they quickly exit, leaving the prisoner alone with the leathered executioner. Stepping softly, he draws closer to the cage, withdrawing from his boot the long-bladed knife. A sigh of excitement passes through the throng of onlookers as it appears. “Yes,” says one voice, in tones almost dreamy, “the knife.”

The executioner lifts the blade slowly, pushing it forward slowly until its tip makes small, precise contact with the shoulder blade. At the cold touch, the man roars for the first time, straining his body forward away from the steel. But with the gentle persistence of a lover, the knife follows him until he crashes to a halt, his chest pressed against the bars in front of him. He breathes in great racking gasps, spent in fury.

The knife withdraws to allow the audience to see the first drop of dark crimson, starting the chant now familiar to them. Their hands beat an accompanying rhythm as it swells in power. “The blood. The blood.”

Without warning, the knife is placed again in the shallow hole, then drawn slowly down the man’s back in a shallow, diagonal slash, leaving a bright unbroken line of red in its silver wake, stopping only when it reaches the man’s waist.

The chant continues as the man’s head droops forward, his forehead banging loudly on a metal bar. He seems dazed, almost unconscious. But when the executioner appears again in front of him, his eyes dilate to enormous size.

“Yes! Let him have the blood!” The expostulations from the frenzied watchers are punctuated by screams and cries. The dull wooden banging becomes arhythmic, chaotic.

The executioner now holds the glass bottle in one hand; in the other, he grasps a large silver funnel by its neck. Leaping onto the platform, standing

only inches from the man in the cage, he inserts the stem between two bars. Then he twists off the cap, holding the bottle cautiously by its neck.

The man screams, his mouth torn open. He slams his face against the cage, snapping his teeth like a dog at the executioner who stands so close.

The black glove reaches high into the air, holds the bottle aloft, directly above the funnel's mouth.

"Yes!" scream the revelers at the stage's boundary. "Let him know the blood!"

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"No!" shouted Stephen at last, struggling against the terror that had numbed him as he opened the heavy door to the auditorium. "Trout!" he shouted again, as the door banged shut behind him. He sprinted down the center aisle, his vision frozen on the small red bottle.

"Are you crazy?" he screamed at the men as he reached them. "Let me through!"

Recognizing a friend's face, he grabbed the man by his shoulders and twisted him away from the scene on stage.

"Wake up!" he yelled into the startled face. "We have to stop this! Come to your senses!"

But the man only struggled free of his grip, unshaken. And others moved to stop Stephen's interruption.

"Grab him!" someone yelled. And several men clutched at his arms and shoulders as he punched his way through the crowd and began scrambling upon the stage. As he hooked one knee onto the raised floor, he was brutally pulled back and thrown down.

"Stephen!" Trout's voice sounded impossibly distant to Stephen, yet booming with a fear Stephen had never heard. "Get these maniacs away from me!"

"Hang on!" he yelled, jumping to his feet and again trying to ascend the stage. As he was jerked away this time, one man pinned his arms securely behind his back, dragging him several yards from the stage.

"Do it!" a voice commanded. Others added their cries. The theater again reverberated with hysterical shouting.

The executioner, stock-still through the fracas, turned to face his audience. His eyes, just visible in the leather hood's slits, momentarily gazed out at the confused mass of bodies, as though making a judgment. Then they turned back to Dracut. The hand lifted. The bottle upturned. A small flood of red poured into the funnel, making a swirling path around the gleaming silver bowl; then it flowed through the neck and onto Trout Dracut's heaving back.

Trout's cry reverberated in Stephen's ear, so deafening that he shuddered beneath it, helpless. But as the echoes died, he found new strength, savagely thrashing backward with both shoulders to break his captors' grip. Before anyone could stop him again, he vaulted upon the stage and ran to the cage where Trout hung motionless from the iron bar, his knees buckled, his full weight pulling against the handcuffs. Down his back ran a scarlet stain, the blood from the bottle mingled forever with the blood from his own wound.

Stephen stepped quickly upon the platform, pushing away the executioner, who toppled to the stage floor and landed hard on one shoulder.

“Did you enjoy this?” Stephen cried, his voice breaking. “Are you happy?”

But the man only rose calmly to his feet and regarded Stephen for a moment. He then removed a key from a zippered pocket in his heavy gauntlet, tossed it at Stephen’s feet, and ran off the stage.

“You sick fuck!” Stephen shrieked, spit flying from his lips. Then he turned to Trout. At his first close view of the bizarre sight, a wave of instinctive revulsion swept over him. More than anything else, he wanted to turn and run, leaving Trout to take care of himself. Hadn’t he brought this on himself, after all, through his cowardice and hypocrisy? Stephen pushed away the thought, then shrugged off his topcoat and began wiping away the blood, feeling that he might retch at any minute. He opened his mouth to speak, to say something reassuring to Trout, but he could only choke out two words.

“Wake up,” he said, just as the sound of a slamming door made him leap to his feet. He turned his head, vaguely aware that the men in the audience were silently departing. He strained his eyes to make out the forms moving under the dim house lights. One of the last men to reach the exits turned and called to him across the empty rows of shabby seats.

“Let him be, Stephen,” the voice said. “He’s not worth crying over.”

Then he followed the others out the door, leaving Stephen and Trout an isolated island in the ocean of harsh white light. His hand shaking, Stephen picked up the key from the floor and unlocked the handcuffs, noticing that Trout’s wrists were smeared with bands of blood. When the second bracelet released, Trout fell heavily against him, knocking him to the shaky floor of the platform. At that moment, the house and stage lights suddenly died, making Stephen gasp at the hollow darkness. Feeling that at any moment a hand would extend from that blackness to stop him, he tried to revive Trout, struggling at the same time to rise to his feet. But the dead weight was too heavy for him: he fell again, landing awkwardly on his back with Trout’s head on his chest.

“God damn it!” he shouted. Instinctively, he shoved away Trout’s wet, slippery torso, desperate to be free of the inert, heavy burden. Trout’s head banged heavily against the wood as Stephen wrenched himself away, but he didn’t care. He dragged himself hand-over-hand to the farthest edge of the platform, pounding his fists on the thin plywood.

“Damn you, Trout,” he yelled again, falling onto his back in exhaustion. Above him, the far reaches of the empty theater shouted his own voice back at him. Finally, still shaking so violently that standing was almost impossible, he rose to his feet and turned to where the unconscious man lay. He didn’t know what he would say to Trout when he woke up. But he knew he needed to find the right words.

Only All the Dead

She wakes with only one thought: bathroom, mouthwash. Before her woman knocks. Oh God, God, tens, hundreds of thousands dead. She rises. The laptop begins telling her day. But the nightmare extrudes. Ezekiel's wheels, the prophet's four-bodied creatures, the valley of white bones, their reanimation. *Slain are the flesh; breathe upon the slain; cause you to come up from your graves.* But those numberless bodies hacked, shot, gassed. Those bodies lay inert across northern Africa. Bulldozers their fate, not the breath of God. Fierce machines, not sinews, would jerk them from their blood-bleached canyons. She feels her irises shake. The other signs could be quelled, masked. But she knew her irises sometimes jittered. Yesterday, before the news came, her chief possibly had noticed. Did he know? Would he confront her if he did? The dead in their valleys know what she hides. Enough. She coughs and stumbles her way to the bathroom, slams the door shut with her back, breaths hard, slumps back, hears, too soon, the punctual knock. All right. Just finishing up here. Out in a moment. She starts on her gums with her electric toothbrush. Cold water shoots between her teeth, stabs below the gum line, searching, whining. She gasps, almost stops, but forces the probing to continue, harder. Finally, it pierces the flesh, the spit flowers red. She bites down, pain flowing with water into the sink. She lifts the lid from the toilet tank, balances the weight, sets it gently on the padded seat. She stops the scouring in her mouth, the bright red fading to clear. The vodka pint comes dripping from the bottom. She unscrews the top. She had searched many stores to find the long eye-dropper made of glass. She watches it fill with vodka. She braces herself against the counter, then squeezes the bulb as hard as she can. Like the angels covered with eyes, caught in wheels within wheels, frozen in Ezekiel's sixth vision, the mirror flashes white light points. She swallows blood, water, vodka, a cry. Her order could not have been wrong. Everything would have happened as it did if she had decided something different. Wasn't that true? The flashing begins to ebb, the room to right itself. Another knock, this time on the bathroom door. Almost done. Pick out my clothes for the first part of the morning, please. She shoots one more dropper of vodka down her throat, nearly gagging. Another minute and her face, makeup applied, stares back at her. Certainty fixes itself in her eyes. No, she had been prudent. The living and the dead might rise against her, but nothing she swallowed had made her assess the options wrongly. Back in the bedroom, she speaks clearly, directs her woman precisely, plays the recording from the start. Dressed, hair

done, briefcase loaded, she asks for a moment alone. The woman leaves, she crosses the room to the *prie-dieu*, given to the house by a Greek Metropolitan, nearly falls on it. Crossing herself beneath the crucifix on the wall, she ponders how Ezekiel's vision of the dead returning to their bodies had crept into the creed she recites every day. The most bizarre image in a book more metaphorical than the Apocalypse of John. Who could take it as anything but a figure? She resists the desire to drop her head onto her hands, pulls back her mouth to block a sob. A man's voice reaches her through the door. Madame President, absolutely not one more second. She stands.

Near the Windows

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ometimes I'll be sitting out on our deck—or maybe I should say *my* deck, now that Buddy, my husband, is dead—I'll be sitting out here, trying to clear my thoughts and put everything in a proper perspective, trying to plan for my future, like I am now. And then just the weather, some stray breeze or smell, will jerk me back to the night Jack died, and the even more awful night that came a couple months later. It was hot that night in Belize and tonight it’s cold and damp in Maine, but the temperature doesn’t matter. Here I am, alone at night, thinking of all that blood, hearing the sound of my own screaming.

Buddy hated freezing nights like this one. I remember he said once that when it gets below zero way up north here the white stars look like cheap glass sequins on a black cocktail dress. He was great for saying things like that. ‘Analogies,’ he called them. Half the time, even after fourteen years of marriage, I couldn’t understand what he meant. He’d come up with wild things like ‘My job makes me feel as empty as a test tube in a cancer research lab.’ If I asked him why a cancer lab, specifically, he’d just shrug what drew me to him, at first, way back when. For a while, it seemed interesting that a big man like Buddy would try to sound artistic, especially considering that he never read anything more poetic than *Sports Illustrated.* But pretty soon all his words were making *me* feel as empty as a stupid test tube. If I hadn't had our little boy and my hobbies to take my mind off Buddy, I might have knocked him off myself. That was the way I felt before I went to Belize, at least. For a while, after I got back, though, I kind of mellowed toward Buddy. But it wasn't too long before the old problems started roiling up again. I don’t know. Now that Buddy’s dead and buried, I think maybe I should have tried harder to see the good in him, especially after Jack’s accident.

But it was so hard. Dusting his rec room sometimes, I'd actually have fantasies about getting rid of him. Buddy was a gun maniac, like most of the men around here. Had an oak rack for all his rifles and shotguns and maybe twenty handguns that he kept in an antique case his mother gave him for his birthday. A gun case from his mom for a birthday. That right there should tell you to expect the kind of trouble that, sure enough, shot us in the behinds.

Anyway, dusting his guns and trophies—yeah, trophies from high school sports, what else?—sometimes I'd eye those guns and think about letting him have it. I remember one time, the day after we had a big fight, I fired three bullets into the plaque he won in high school for being the best Irish-American

student athlete in his class. When he got home from work, I told him I didn’t know the gun was loaded, that I was bored, just messing around. But I knew it was loaded, all right. I'd been mopping the kitchen floor, still furious with him from the night before, when I just threw down the mop, marched into his damn rec room, found a loaded rifle, and let the plaque have it. A symbolic thing, you could call it. Funny how Buddy reacted when I showed him the plaque. His eyes got huge at first, then narrowed right down to mere slits, then he turned around and left the room, not one word spoken. For a few weeks, though, the incident seemed to make him more manageable.

But those thoughts of murder were only daydreams, of course, nothing to take serious. Besides, I know from my detective novels that a perfect murder is hard to pull off unless the killer has no connection with the victim. If you're a paid assassin or just some psycho who knocks off strangers, you can get away with it. But let a man get shot, a husband with a roomful of guns and a hot wife, and who do they throw in jail the way they would some drug fiend? The hot wife, that’s who.

I suppose that now I'll never know why Buddy's job made him so tense, not that I care anymore. I really don’t want to think about what set him off that night December. Since when is selling snow blowers in the winter and garden tractors in the summer like speculating on the stock market? The day he called himself ‘traumatized,’ I blew my stack. Some of those weird ideas, I know, he got from a radio psychologist. He should have been grateful for that job, if you ask me. His hours were steady and so was the money—not anything *great*, the money, but reliable.

Every now and then, when I was sick to death of his whining, I’d try to get his engine running with some serious sex. I mean the very hot kind. You don't need a degree in sex therapy, though, to know that this is not the best reason for making love. Huffing and puffing over him, I felt like I was trying to bring the dead back to life. Sure, Buddy's body was still nice and trim for a man breathing down the neck of forty. Trim or not, though, he would just lay there like a side of raw beef. Beneath that layer of muscle—a layer getting softer by the minute, I could add—he was a sponge, a slop bucket. I would picture him at fifty and think that I didn't want that picture laying next to me in bed. But who's to say that he wouldn't have changed, if he had lived? Maybe I was a fool. Maybe I could have been pretty happy—well, content, at least—with a middle-aged Buddy beside me.

One second after seeing the pearly gates during those bedroom escapades, Buddy would be shrinking to nothing. A minute more and he'd be in a coma, his thick arms and legs all splayed out, looking like some bear that had wandered into the house and was testing the beds. You know this story. You've heard it a million times from unsatisfied wives on the daytime talk shows. I'd be perched on one corner of the bed, still revved up, even if I'd seen the gates myself, which I probably hadn't, smoking and chewing my bottom lip, watching the long silky hairs on his chest flutter from his snores. The more time I spent staring at that chest hair, the more I got to hate it. It wasn't curly or coarse, but sort of wispy and blowy like some damn woman's hair. He always was wanting me to rub my face against it when we were getting sexy, but usually I refused. That was Buddy's idea of great foreplay, because all he had to do was lay there like a gunny sack while I supposedly got turned on by chafing my facial skin. I know that some women would have been nuts for that hair, the way it fanned

out nice and even across his pecs and his almost-flat stomach. But it wasn't what I wanted. It wasn't rough like a wool blanket. Experiences like that made me realize beauty can get ugly.

Anyway, one night I was out on the deck, drinking the first and last vodka Collins over my limit. Just like I'm doing now, come to think of it. In fact, I probably came out here that night trying to get my thoughts organized and instead got to thinking about poor dead Jack. And tonight I've come out here and have *two* poor dead men waiting for me to think about them. There's one for the books. Anyway, the moon was already up that night, just the shape of a nail clipping hanging over the pine forest behind our house, the sky all muddled with dark blues, a few pink streamers left over from sunset. Buddy would appreciate that description. And the weather was freaky, way warmer than usual for mid-December. The newspaper was already counting down the shopping days left before Christmas. I should have been cooking dinner, but little John was staying overnight with a friend and I didn't feel any great desire for eating alone with Buddy, much less cooking the meal. So I sat there, feeling almost relaxed. To tell the truth, I was thinking about Jack and that awful night in Belize. Staring into the greenery, I could almost see his body when he walked out of the bathroom in my room at that tourist camp. Oh, I'm perfectly aware that most women would prefer my husband to Jack. Buddy has those big watermelon shoulders and lean hips that my girlfriends all like. Jack was all gangly legs and arms, not manly like Buddy at all. You might even call him bony, I suppose, but he had nice shoulders that came out well beyond his hip bones. That difference was just what I wanted. Believe me, when I got a look at him in the low light of that cabin, him stepping kind of sheepishly toward me, his long blond hair turned loose from his ponytail, wearing just a pair of tight running shorts, his legs long like a colt's—well, I was pretty much ready to blast off before he even touched me. The sight of Buddy in the buff hadn't done that to me in years. Maybe never, come to think about it.

Anyway, just when I was thinking about Jack's body, I hear the crack of a gunshot. I jump up a little from the deck, running my eyes across the fields behind our house as the echo died over the forest. It was hunting season, so I wasn't too alarmed, but it was near dark, and the shot sounded like it came from very close by. Even in backwoods Maine we've got laws about not hunting after dark or too close to residential property. But don't expect safety codes like that to stop the local yokels when they think they've spotted a seven-point buck. They'd be chasing moose and deer into homes for the elderly if they thought they could get away with it—which they probably could. One year, not twenty miles from my own home, a woman got shot right in her own backyard taking clothes off her line. The bozo who killed her said he mistook her white mittens for a deer's tail. Her mittens! There was a big ruckus about it for weeks, but the bozo got off with just a wrist-slap

So, when I hear this shot, I'm just about to holler out something rude like 'Get the hell off our property with that gun, jerk,' when I hear a second shot. And this time I realize that it came from *inside* the house. I set down my drink, careful to find a level spot on the redwood planks. I'm thinking fast to myself, waiting to hear Buddy yell out some explanation. Nothing happens. I pick up the highball glass, take a long swallow, set it down again. Then one clear thought comes into my mind: insurance.

God bless my mother for telling me to keep harping at Buddy until he carried enough insurance to set me up for life, should anything awful happen to him. Me and my mother had our share of quarrels before she died, most of them about money I didn't want to give her and vice-versa, but she was right on target with that advice. It was my own good foresight, though, that told me to make sure Buddy took out policies that pay out even if the holder commits suicide. Policies like that cost more, but when I started nagging Buddy to buy them, I was already hopeful that the doomed look on his face might be a promising sign. So after the second shot, I'm sitting very still, the night growing very black around me, and I'm hoping, hoping, hoping that Buddy didn't just shoot himself in the leg while cleaning a rifle. When that thought hits me, I have visions of Buddy laying in bed for weeks, smelling real hairy. That would be his deepest fantasy come to life, to have me waiting on him hand and foot. I whisper to myself, "Just hold your ground, girl. Even if he didn't blow his brains out, maybe he's bleeding to death slowly." But that idea made things worse, because, after everything's said and done, I have a very tender heart. Just let me hit a raccoon with the car or see some little kids on the news covered with flies and starving to death in Africa and I'm off and crying for days. So I don't relish the thought of even Buddy laying on the floor helpless, a big hole in his gut, panting with pain like a dying pony, maybe dragging himself across my polished hardwood floor as he desperately tries to save himself, clutching for the phone, probably knocking over the matched puffin lamps and maybe my porcelain birds that stupid me put in his sacred rec room. He probably wouldn't even bother calling me for help.

I finish off the drink and stand up, prepared to find out the truth and to end that poor man's suffering, if necessary. Rumors about Jack's accident to the contrary, I've never killed anything on purpose in my whole life. But I figure if I find Buddy half-dead in the rec room, maybe I can muster up the necessary compassion. I swear I didn't have any plans of actually shooting him. It was more a fantasy thing again. What I had in mind was something like watching from a distance while he expired, the way Bette Davis does in that old movie when her namby-pamby husband has a heart attack and Bette just sits in her chair looking icy and elegant while he staggers half-way up the stairs before he croaks and drops like a rock.

Then everything snaps into place. *Two shots*, I think. It hits me like a big flash, as though one of those huge stars in the sky exploded. Two shots. Two! No one shoots himself once, lives through it, then takes another shot to finish himself off. Oh sure, it's probably happened sometime in history. Maybe Napoleon or the last king of Russia, but not a man as basically gutless as Buddy. Then I ask myself if he could have accidentally shot himself twice in a row. That sounds much more like my husband, but still not likely. "Damn him," I say out loud as I march down the steps, heading for the front lawn to take a glimpse through the window of the rec room.

I've been living out in the sticks since I first married Buddy almost fifteen years ago, so you would think I'd be accustomed to that special winter darkness we get out here. City people never really know it. But no, I've never gotten used to this darkness. Up here, the sun goes down and the world's as black as the inside of my laundry room with the door closed. At night, you get more than ten feet away from the house lights, and the darkness swallows you whole, makes you feel as though the next step you take could send you flying off a cliff over the

ocean. Sure, the moon might be full, a big white balloon with a face, but that's cold comfort.

So I'm feeling very edgy as I come around the corner of the house, stepping on the soaked grass like a thief in my little house slippers. Once I'm in the front, I see that all the windows are dark. The light shining through the glass doors to the deck seems miles away. I trot the last few steps to the rec room, but some instinct tells me not to get too close, so I cut down the lawn a ways toward the road. When I stop, I'm shaking from the cold and the strangeness of being alone in the dark, my slippers soaked. Through the window of the rec room I can just make out a thin bar of light. I don't know what to make of this for a second, then I realize that someone has moved the rifle cabinet to block most of the window.

"Buddy!" I holler at the house. "What the hell you doing in there?" The sound of my words in that black winter night make me think of ghosts, but my husband's voice comes back at me like a cannon boom.

"The Italian parliament is in total disarray!" he yells. I can just barely make out his figure in the space between the cabinet and the window frame. He moves a little bit, and I see that he's holding a rifle.

"Don't you mean the *English* parliament, hon? Remember when we saw it on the news last night?" I feel like a fool shouting such nonsense at the front wall of my house, but it's the best I can come up with.

"I said Italian and I mean Italian and nobody can tell me the Vatican Bank isn't involved in this!"

I have absolutely no clue what he means. I'm not even sure Italy has a parliament and don't ask me where he got the idea that the Vatican has a bank, but he sounds more upset than I've ever seen him. What's more, it's becoming pretty clear that he's not bleeding to death. "Buddy," I say, trying to sound calm, which isn't easy when you're yelling, "I still think you mean English, but I'm coming back inside. Why'd you move the cabinet? You didn't drag it across the hardwood, did you?"

"Stay out of this house!" he yells. Then a shot cracks out. A perfect stupe, I turn around to look behind me, wondering who the hell he's shooting at. Then I realize it's me. I hit the ground like a soldier in a trench. "Buddy!" I scream at him, spitting some grass from my mouth. "What's wrong with you? Did you aim that shot at *me*?"

"No one comes in this house until I know more about the political crisis in Italy!" And he fires off another round, like a final word. I flop face down on the grass again, wondering if he can see me from inside. When he fires again, I do a crab-crawl in reverse, the whole front of me plastered to the ground like it was my one hope for life. The lawn slopes downhill away from the house, and when I'm far enough away so I figure he can't hit me, I lift up my head and shoulders a bit.

"You've ruined my best cashmere sweater," I yell. "And if you broke any of my birds, I'll come in there and shoot your head off!"

Normally, Buddy was hard to provoke. He spent his life in a sulk, but it took a lot of prodding to make him blow up. So I'm surprised when he fires off several more rounds, a regular barrage. In the dim light from behind the rifle case, I can see wisps of smoke floating through the air, see Buddy throwing down one firearm and picking up another. I get up on my knees, pull my soggy sweater away from my wet skin and look down at it. I want to scream something

mean at him, but when I speak again, I try very hard to sound friendly, willing to look at things from his point of view. I'm pretty sure that this is what a crisis expert would recommend.

"Honey," I say to him—sounding quite soothing, considering all the shooting and yelling—"I'm very glad to hear about your new interest in European politics. You know I've been saying for a long time that you need a hobby besides guns. But if you won't let me back in the house, I'm going to have to walk down to Doris and Jim's place, so do you think maybe you could just toss my cigarettes and lighter out the window? They're in the kitchen, next to the fridge. I'll wait here while you get them." By the time I'm finished yelling all this, I'm panting like a dog, but I think fast and add "Throw them far out from the window, honey." I knew my own husband wouldn't kill me, mind you, but I had no designs on getting too close to that window again.

"Cigarettes kill and my body is unpolluted!" He shrieks this out like a runaway engine, his voice so high and eerie in the darkness that I suddenly feel so alone I could cry. Then all hell breaks loose in the rec room. More shots go off than I can count, the air around me humming with the shock waves. I see bursts of fire from the rife barrel when he shoots through the open window, but mostly he's firing at the walls inside the house. Glass is shattering, tables flying over. I can just see my tiny Baltimore orioles and all his little bird-friends smashed in a thousand pieces. When the shooting finally stops, I get to my feet, keeping my head very low.

"His body is unpolluted," I grouse to myself, jumping over the ditch and setting off down the road. "Drinks beer and inhales chips all night, but suddenly he's in training for the Olympics." Doris and Jim, our nearest neighbors, live a full half-mile away. This is bad enough, considering that I might as well have been barefoot in those slippers, but Doris also just happens to be Jack's aunt, and I hadn't spoken to her since the big accident. I picture her face peering at me through the glass when I show up on her doorstep.

I'm the first to say that Doris has her fine points, but her face is nothing but one big pinch, even in the best of times. Between the idea of seeing Doris again, the ringing in my ears from all that shooting, and the sound of my husband screaming new gibberish out the window, I'm so rattled and distraught that I burst into tears. I'm not even scared of the dark anymore.

"To hell with you, mister!" I yell at the house, shaking my fist at him. "If I find all my birds shot to pieces and the floor all gouged up in there I'll give you something better to worry about than politics. And it *was* England, not Italy!"

Nowadays, sitting on the deck in the morning, afternoon, or early evening, my thoughts always seem to circle bock to Buddy or Jack. The feminists can say what they like about how great it is to be a single woman, but since Buddy was killed, I've missed having a man in the house.

For a while after his death, though, I hardly knew he was gone. What with the funeral, the wrangling and bickering with insurance companies, meeting with lawyers about the suit I'm bringing against the local police—well, all of that kept Buddy in my mind so much that it was like he was still with me. Funny, but I was a hundred times busier putting Buddy to his eternal rest than I ever was taking care of him alive. When all that commotion calmed down a bit, though, and especially after little Zach went away to private school on account of all the vindictive gossip in this hick town, I had time to start mourning my husband decently. Or at least to notice he was gone.

It seems funny that a down-home kind of girl like me, just a plain old housewife—because that's what I am, basically, even if I still look fifteen years younger than what I actually am—should live through two fiascos involving dead men. One per lifetime ought to be enough for anyone. I guess I must be well-adjusted, all things told, because either one of those tragedies probably would have sent other women straight to the bottle or even into the mental hospital. Not that I didn't have my shaky moments the first few nights after Buddy went loco. In my nightmares, I'd see the whole scene played out again. The local cops and the state police surrounding the house, the glaring lights shooting across our lawn from the floodlights, Doris and Jim and me standing behind a police van, trying to keep away from reporters. And the sounds. Cops yelling through bullhorns, roaring car engines. And Buddy either screaming his head off or trying to shoot off everybody else's. I never dreamed he kept so much ammunition in that room. He could have held off an army for days, much less the local police. But no, he had to be stupid. I still don't believe he was climbing out the window to come after the cops. With his luck, he probably just tripped and fell halfway through the shot-out window. He took three bullets, one in the gut. But the coroner said he probably would survive the bullet wounds. What killed him was a piece of jagged glass that went right through his chest into his heart. Poor Buddy. Once you get right down to it, Buddy's death and Jack's accident aren't really all that similar, apart from the windows. When Jack died, the only noise was the boom of that window when the iron rod slipped out of place—followed by my hysterics, of course. When Doris and Jim came into my cabin to see what on earth was wrong, a somber kind of mood fell over everyone. I have to admit, Doris and Jim took the blow with dignity. I remember Doris drawing her breath in real sharp when she first saw Jack, like she'd been kicked. And then she just fell into Jim's arms, crying.

And the difference between the police in Maine and the cops in Belize was absolutely like the difference between night and day. Down in Belize, they came in very quiet. They were shocked, but they acted respectful. Not a one of them made any snide remarks about what I was doing alone with Jack. But those bastardly police in Maine, they made me want to grab a gun myself. Let's just say tact is not their strong point. They swooped down on the house as though some murderer from *America's Most Wanted* was in the rec room. And snide remarks? I wish I had a nickel for every time one of them gave me a funny look. And I heard Jack's name get mentioned more than once, too, always behind my back. Coward.

Naturally, everyone around here is convinced that I was plotting to get my hands on Jack even before we left Maine for Belize. That's nothing but one big evil lie. Hell, the trip had been arranged for months; Jack was a last-minute addition to the group. It was just Buddy's usual lousy luck that his boss finally decided to have his hemorrhoids removed at that particular time. Right in the middle of a terrible winter we were, snow-blowers on back-order for a month, fistfights breaking out in the store over not getting repairs done fast enough, and fat old Harry up and decides he can't sit on his tube for another month. Being Harry's right-hand man, Buddy couldn't be spared for a solid ten days. When I told Doris and Jim that Buddy was still willing to pay our full share in the package deal, it was *their* idea, not *mine,* that they could buy Buddy's share and give it to Jack. Frankly, I thought it was strange that a college kid would even *want* to tag along with his aunt and uncle and their friend. I remember telling Buddy that Jack must have turned out to be an awful mama's boy.

I can't deny, though, that from the first moment I laid eyes on Jack in the Boston airport, I felt flushed all over. He looked like John F. Kennedy Jr. at his best, except he had dark blond hair with small, ultra-white teeth. Buddy's teeth were nice, but they always looked sort of big and horsey to me. And Jack had just a touch more of the rapscallion to him than J.F.K. Jr. had. Once we were settled in Belize, I was close to panting every time Jack came around me in his cut-off shorts or bikini briefs. The ironic part, though, is that it really wasn't me who did anything you could call "provocative." Sure, we kept more company together than we would have if Buddy had been there, but I never did anything that the other wives in the group could fault me for. It was Jack who was the suggestive one. Right from the very first day, he buddied up to me, making jokes about us being the two lonely ones, him with no girlfriend, me with no husband. As the days passed, those jokes got more and more loaded, until finally he was saying things like 'Mrs. Kilburn, if you were my wife, I wouldn't let you out of the backyard in that bikini.' Right out in the open he'd make remarks like that. And he might put one arm around me, letting it just dangle loosely, as though I was one of the guys. I would try not to look pleased, but I probably didn't convince anyone that I wasn't.

Anyway, on our fifth night in Belize, we were dancing at the swankiest resort on San Juan, the island—they call it a 'caye,' down there— that all the tourists go to. It's a few miles off the coast, just inside that big coral reef that brings down all the scuba divers. When I met the others at the restaurant that night, I was wearing tight black slacks and a lavender silk blouse that showed more cleavage than I usually allow myself. Doris raised her eyebrows when she saw me dressed that way, but I ignored her. After dinner, Jack showed up in a sleeveless tee exactly the color of his hair and green baggy shorts that came to his knees, the kind that the college boys wear these days. I saw him coming across the dance floor toward me and decided right then and there that fate could be resisted no longer. There's something about the ocean breezes always blowing through those islands that makes you feel kind of tired and excited at the same time. Once I was dancing with Jack, I knew right where those breezes were blowing me. It only took about a minute for us to realize we both wanted the same thing, but we knew it would be risky, since we had to use my cabin. Doris and Jim and one of the other couples had cabins the same building as me, which wasn't good, but Jack had just a bunk in a room he was sharing with four other college boys, so that was out. Dancing that night, I thought of all the years I'd spent raising Buddy from the dead in the sack and I was ready to take a chance. Jack sure wasn't worried. Who is, when you're young and stupid and charged up for sex? But I swear that neither one of us ever dreamed we would hurt Doris and Jim. And we sure didn't think one of us would end up dead.

And there's the whole difference between Buddy and Jack for you in a nutshell. Jack followed his instincts, like I do, but Buddy would just let them shrivel up and die. Probably the only impulsive thing Buddy ever did in his whole life was barricade himself inside the rec room and look how that turned out, People around here say I have a hell of a nerve to cause two men to get killed, then to turn around and sue the police for using unnecessary deadly force. Well, they don't stop to think that Buddy would still be alive today—in prison, probably, or in the nut-hatch, but still alive—if the cops hadn't treated the whole incident like a turkey-shoot. No one was in danger as long as Buddy stayed in the house, so why couldn't they just

keep their distance and try to pacify him? At the worst, he would have shot himself.

After about three hours of the Mexican stand-off, I realized I hadn't heard any shooting or yelling from the house for several minutes. I was sitting in some cop's car smoking probably my thousandth cigarette. When the silence fell, my hopes rose that maybe things were over, that Buddy had calmed down. Funny, but all my dreams about insurance money had gone right out the window. Sitting in that cold car with the door open, staring at the awful black sky overhead, hearing all those police officers talking about Buddy like he was a natural born killer, listening to Buddy's babbling about Italy—well, I guess all of it made me feel that Buddy and I may have made a lot of mistakes, but that at least we were still together, still raising our son, still paying our bills, still going out to dinner or a movie or bowling every now and then. And for some reason—to this day, I don't know why—I kept thinking about how Buddy had met me at the airport in Boston when I flew back from Belize. I'd never thought much about that, but when I was sitting there in that police cruiser, it suddenly seemed important. Anyway, while I was craning my head listening for more noise, suddenly I got the feeling that something was terribly wrong. I wanted to get out of that car and tell the police one more time they had to be careful, that I knew Buddy would come to his senses if they just waited him out. But that was when Jim came over to the car and told me the cops had shot Buddy dead.

Now that I'm notorious—an adulteress, a cradle-robber, a drunk, a man-killer—it seems as though people are waiting to see what I do next. Let them wonder. I'm not any of those things, of course, not even an adulteress, technically speaking. I don't deny that I was ready and willing to break my sacred vow of fidelity to Buddy, but that rusty metal rod in Belize brought my venture into adultery to a screeching halt. An incident like that just goes to show you that it's not safe to travel in those backward countries. In the United States, you wouldn't see a set-up like that even in the cheesiest motel. A big glass window right behind the head of the bed, hinged at the top so that it swings outward, propped open by a metal rod. You could look at it for one second and see lawsuits. But I wasn't thinking of safety from freak accidents while Jack and I were rolling around on that thin mattress, just getting serious. So when that prop jiggled loose from its hole somehow and the window came crashing down, driving the pointy end of the rod straight through Jack's neck, you'd better believe that my first shriek was loud enough to wake the dead. Don't even ask me how anyone could believe that I *wanted* that to happen to poor Jack. There's no explaining some people's perverted imaginations. Not too many women, I don't think, would want to be found in bed with a naked man almost young enough to be their son, one of them gushing blood and the other shocked to her soul.

And it's nobody's business why Buddy took me back knowing what happened. I was still in a state of shock, of course, when we landed in Boston. Our tickets took us all the way through to Bangor, but, while we were waiting in Logan, who showed up out of nowheres but Buddy? I was sitting in a corner of the departure lounge when I saw him walking toward me. Maybe my first instinct was to run, I don't remember. But then my eyes met his, and he raised up his hand, like a witness taking an oath. When he got close enough to me, he said, "I came down to drive you home, Nancy." And those were the only words he spoke until long after we were in the car and heading north. When we started walking away from the gate, side by side, he put his strong heavy arm around my shoulders. From the minute that Jack died, I hadn't stopped shaking for one second, but when I felt Buddy's arm across the small of my back, it was like something

jumping inside me finally stopped. I want to tell you, I almost melted right onto the floor, that's how much of a relief it was. Buddy picked up my small suitcase and side by side we walked straight past Doris and Jim and the others. Buddy never turned his head to look at them. All the way down the concourse and into the main terminal, past the security post and down an escalator, out the doors and across the moving lines of cabs and busses, right into the big dark parking garage, he kept his arm around me.

A Morphology of Panic

*T*hrough days of hard biking, Mark, the man he had met on the Aran Islands, stayed on his mind. One night, after sixty cold, rainy miles, he found a B and B in an old stone farmhouse outside Sligo. After dropping his gear and a quick wash-up, he biked into the city. As he bumped down a dirt road lined with box hedges, full darkness fell. For a moment, a clear swath of sky opened above him, yellow stars wheeling against cobalt. He slowed his pace, trying to freeze the image in his memory, but after another mile, the city greeted him dirty and raucous. He had planned his trip so he would reach Sligo for the first night of a local arts festival, but now he wondered why. No lover of fairs and circuses as a child, his adult aversion to carnival glitter had a new, sharper focus.

On an impulse, he had left the states without his klonopin, the orange pills that held his attacks in a state of armed truce. A measly .5 milligrams a day. A friendly little benzodiazepine, not a psychotropic. Such a drug, he told himself, barely registers on the radar screen of a drug-dependent world. But reliance of any type grated against his autonomy, made him resentful, perverse. He had agreed to start the drug only after months of horrific trips to the grocery store made him admit to the inadequacy of sheer will power. With his hands numb from steering his cart white-knuckled down the aisles, waiting in the check-out line became unbearable. Before he finally resigned himself to drug dependency, he began writing his checks in the car, feeling like some outcast or thief. Inside the store, after his latest ordeal in the harsh fluorescent aisles, he would fill in the price with one stroke. Idling in place, watching the line like a hungry animal for every sign of forward movement, he felt the skin would snap off his bones.

So he had parsed anxiety's grammar, identified its morphemes, formalized the transformational rules. A new language mapped itself across his neural transmitters, a knowledge innate and unwanted. But in Ireland, he had told himself, he would break the panic cycle through exercise and self-discipline. His fatigue would be bone-deep, honest, not his typical job-induced enervation. And being alone would help, too. But, like a disease transmuting to a more virulent form, the attacks in Ireland peaked in new patterns, lingered for hours like a tequila hangover. Jet-lagged on his first day, he biked north from Shannon Airport through the Burren's lunar landscape, where Cromwell had cursed the scarcity of trees for hanging Irish renegades. Stopping for a drink at a small shop in Lisdoonvarna, he felt the familiar symptoms crawl through him. As he began biking

north, a fabric of panic wove itself into his trip. The awaiting attack was like something tangible, intelligent. An enemy sometimes holding its distance, but always keeping its prey in sight.

In Sligo, he found every restaurant crowded. He chose a place at random, was soon wedged between a wall and a table full of soccer players drinking Guiness straight from pitchers. He wrote in his travel journal, forcing himself to look up every few minutes, take long panning sweeps of the interior. But electric twitches caught him unaware, hard jerks on fish-hooks buried in his flesh. After each snap, he would skulk a look around his table, wondering if anyone had noticed.

Outside again, free, the cold night air restored him enough so that he joined the throng walking down Kennedy Parade toward the Garavogue River. But as he stepped onto a stone bridge, a fresh wave of fear swept through him. He gulped at the damp air, glancing at the black water to his right, measuring the distance to the end of the bridge. Everything melded into a landscape of entrapment, but stepping off the bridge onto packed dirt brought some relief. He exhaled hard, then maneuvered himself to the edge of the crowd. A large crane was parked where the crowd had collected for the fireworks. He leaned against a rear tire, breathing heavily. The crane's cable reached into the black river, making him wonder what was at the end of it. But when he tried to look closer, screams and howls broke his concentration. Turning, he saw an old crone with flowing white hair hobbling down a path, a black cat with glowing orange eyes arched on her shoulder. He gripped the tire tread for support, then blurted out a harsh laugh. *Puppets* he said to himself, shaking his head. *They're just giant puppets, fool.*

The witch was followed by a spherical Irish constable, then by a Celtic princess with butterfly wings and towering head-dress. He tried to analyze the puppets, to figure out where the operators were hidden within the constructions. But taking his mind off the panic always backfired on him, because the symptoms always returned with greater force. He ground his teeth, determined to enjoy the puppet spectacle. But when the first fireworks exploded across the river, everyone rushed toward the bank, whistling and shouting. Pulled along, he looked up at a ragged burst of pink and blue streamers. Sweat beading his face, he stared down at the ground. *Turn it off* he shouted at himself. *This doesn't happen to you when you're outside.*

A young girl screamed, pointing at the crane. The crowd's focus shifted, pushing him closer to the hanging cable. A flash and sizzle from the water as a huge trout alive with phosphorescent fire ascended from the river. He backed away, pushing against the cheering wall of people behind him. The fire began at the fish's mouth and spiraled down the hollow metal frame, sputtering thick orange bursts that sent a film of black greasy smoke over the crowd. He twisted away from the sight, surveying the crush of people for the easiest way out, prepared to surrender, to run. Despite everything, he had never truly yielded before. If he failed to control himself this time, how long before failure became the rule?

"Whoa!" A deep voice spoke directly into his face. "Hey, it's you! Remember me, Mark? On the island? You're Randall, right?"

The man held him by both shoulders, blocking his lunge through the crowd. He looked up at the face. In the dark blue eyes, an image burned, the metal trout suspended above the river in full flame. Was this really the same man? The last

cluster of fireworks exploded overhead, transforming the black clouds into a roiling blend of festival colors. Where had he come from?

"Yes," he shouted above the noise. "I remember you, but I'm leaving." A woman shoved past him and he whirled around as though assaulted, fists clenched at his sides.

"Is something wrong?" the man asked, stepping back and peering hard at his face. "You're green, man. Let me help you get out of this crowd." Mark pulled at his left arm.

"I don't need any help," he said, jerking his arm away. "I'm just tired. And I have a few miles left to bike tonight." He stepped backward as he talked. Spectators still hungry for visual delight pressed into the opening between the two men. *Why does he just stare at me?* Randall thought. *Do I look that crazy?* Finally, he turned his back on Mark and the river, broke into a fast walk.

"Hey!" The voice called after him. "Why the hell won't you talk to me?"

But Randall already was disappearing in the dark.

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He had seen the man first on Inishmore, largest of the Aran Islands. At the island's highest point, the ruins of Dún Aenghus sprawl in three concentric circles. A few meters beyond the outer ring, granite cliffs drop three hundred feet into the Atlantic. Groggy after a long hike from the ferry terminal in Killeany, the largest village, Randall had watched other sightseers milling near the edge. He envied their viewpoint, but held himself back. During college, he had worked as a roofer, climbing ladders with pleasure, knowing that his own strength could keep him from falling. But now even a drop of fifteen feet made him clammy, dry-mouthed. The line between the cliff's edge and the airy gulf beyond seemed fluid, capricious.

One man stood so near the edge he could lean over it. As Randall watched from the top of a low wall, the man straightened up from the brink, turned around to speak to a woman behind him. Shirtless, a few days' growth of beard, baggy camouflage trousers and dusty hiking boots. About Randall's age. When the woman wrapped her fingers around his upper arm, he suddenly plucked her up by the waist. Two jagged stones in the rampart's *chevaux-de-frise* framed the man's torso for Randall's vision in a slanted angle. He twirled the woman about, her legs sailing into the chasm of sky, her arms flailing above his head.

"Let me down, Mark!" she shouted. "Please put me down!"

He glided her to a gentle stop a yard or so from the edge. Faces dazed, they stared at each other with delight and surprise, as though a bright light suddenly had been thrown upon them. Then she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pushed her face against his chest. When they began to kiss, Randall jumped off his rampart. Walking back to town, he surveyed the green fields divided neatly by stone drywall. For generations, islanders had climbed the sheer granite cliffs with baskets of seaweed strapped to their backs, had packed kelp and barnacles, anything organic, into crevices in the rock shelves, forcing the barren limestone into life. Randall thought of their long, solitary climbs up from the sea, their endless labor. He wondered if the man at the cliff knew about it, if he would care if he did know.

In Killeany that night, he showered, ate dinner, then bicycled through dark twisting roads to the American Café, the island's only pub. At a corner table, he drank a pint of lager, updating his daily mileage log. But remembering the man

and woman at the cliff distracted him. *They're gone*, he told himself. *Forget them*. Sagging with exhausted day-trippers, two ferries had sailed at dusk, leaving the island to its natives and a handful of malingering tourists. But he imagined the couple in a cheap B and B somewhere nearby, their passion charged with the sunlight showering down the stark cliffs below Dún Aenghus like a volley of javelins. He thought of fifty women, the Nereids, daughters of Titans, rising from the sea. Sisters lovely in icy gowns, they entered the bed of a mortal man. He was beautiful to the gods, but bound to the land, waiting. Their bodies would ache and release in confident rhythms, like the tide's returning swell.

Before dawn the next day, he was biking at full speed away from Killeany. Morning sifted through the dark sky in layers of wan yellow, the ocean a vast, dark plain. Swinging around a long curve, he found the disc of rising sun straight ahead, the bottom crescent bleeding into a red pool circled by cold green ocean. Ancient ruins cleaved to spines of stone, like charred sticks backlit with flame. When he found the cemetery, he dismounted, began trudging through rows of broken grave markers, shivering from the cold dew seeping through his biking shoes. Behind a hedgerow blue with Irish gentians, he found St. Enda's church hidden at the bottom of a dirt-walled pit. Only the stone walls and floor still remained, the wooden roof long ago rotted to dust. He vaulted the trench surrounding the church, hitting the stone floor on all fours. At one end of the small church, he found the marker above Enda's grave. He kneeled to read the inscription, but time had left only a ghost of the Latin words.

They came from England and Gaul and Rome to study here with you, across that huge ocean to this church no bigger than a tomb. What made them seek you out? What did you teach them? Tell me why I'm here now in your deserted church, blessed St. Enda. Tell me what you told your brothers about your hermit life on this heap of rock in the Atlantic, before the fields became green.

Like hushed voices, fresh winds bent the high weeds above his head. Rain suddenly began pounding at the stone floor. Shuddering beneath his heavy sweater and windbreaker, he rose to his feet, took a last look at Enda's grave, then climbed a low side wall and made a lunge to the outer ridge. But the slick dirt made him slide back into the gorge between the church and the earthwork. He leaned against the stone wall, panting, blinking rain from his eyes. A white-blue bolt of lightning ripped across his vision, jagged splinters ending in a barbed yellow fork. He caught his breath, flattened by the wind against the ancient wall.

"You okay down there?"

Through hard pellets of rain, he saw the face of the man at Dún Aenghus. He was leaning into the trench, one knee planted in the wet dirt. The hand he extended was dirt-smeared, heavy. Randall scanned the wall, then side-stepped, away from the man, stopping at a place where the opposite bank was higher but seemed more solid. Reaching up, he dug both hands into the wet earth, then pulled hard from his shoulders. Grunting, he hooked one knee over the edge. But he lost his purchase, dirt crumbling into clods. He slid backward again, swearing, another rip of lightning thrusting the sky into his face. Then a hand grabbed him beneath his armpit. A long, rough hoist, and he was safe above the rim. Wiping mud from his arms and legs, Randall looked at the man uncertainly,

"Gee, you're welcome," the man said. He stood tall above Randall, his boots planted firmly in the soft ground.

Randall got to his feet, said thanks. But his only clear thought was to curse the luck that made him look so ridiculous in front of this stranger. How long had he

been watching? Had he seen him on his knees before Enda's marker? Did he think he had been praying?

"I'm Mark," he said, holding out his hand. "You were out at the fortress yesterday, right?"

Randall told him his name, then held up his right hand, making them both laugh at the muddy palm.

"Hell," Mark said, "a little mud." He clasped Randall's hand, shook it firmly. "Wild weather, eh?" he asked, looking up. "You know what the Brits say about Ireland, don't you? 'Oh, yes, Ireland,' they say. 'The rain gets a bit warmer there in the summer, doesn't it?' Shit, I should have gone to Italy."

They walked together back across the field to Randall's bike. Mark told him that he was going back to the mainland that morning, then hitching his way north. Where was Randall headed?

"Thanks for the help," Randall said. "I'd walk back to Killeany with you, but I better go ahead and get cleaned up before the ferry leaves."

"There's still four hours, you know," Mark answered. "Plenty of time." His blue eyes regarded Randall with a question.

Randall said thanks, but no. He had other things to do before leaving. They shook hands again, then Randall mounted his bike and began to pedal away. He looked back once, raising a hand in good-bye. In his camouflage pants and a black jacket, Mark was already fading. Through the grey air, Randall saw his small white teeth. The day before, they had glittered in the sunlight at the edge of the high drop into the Atlantic. The perfect teeth of a demi-god sought by the Nereids. Nymphs of the oceans and lakes, their love would shower upon him like torrents of cold water flowing down a towering cataract.

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On Inishbofin, Cromwell's fort clutches a mountain crest with star-figured talons, four broken towers jammed into the bare rock. Three days after the Sligo festival, Randall had sailed from Cleggan into the harbor on a mail boat that bullied its way through high whitecaps. While the crew unloaded cargo, he asked the captain about a road to the fort. The man laughed hoarsely, then yelled something in Irish Gaelic to his mate, who grunted back.

"No road ya'll take that lovely bike on, if 'na good God give you a brain." He settled a massive hand on Randall's shoulder, drove it into a grip that seemed right to him, then pointed at the shore with his other arm. "You be careful, lad," he said, squeezing hard on Randall's shoulder. "That path there only be open when the tide is out. See where it curves behind the village? Best you go when the tide be just low enough, then back you come, no more than two hour."

At dawn the next day, Randall criss-crossed the fog-covered island. Biking fast through a small tunnel of visibility, he might have been at sea, buffeted by northern winds. When the tide ebbed, he hid his bike behind a collapsed toolshed and struck out for the fortress. Through lush green fields, past eyeless carcasses of dead sheep, the narrow trail brought him to a strip of pebbled beach. He jumped a rivulet that flowed inland from the ocean, then climbed a spit of rock that disappeared at one end into the crashing surf. Grey and silent, fog-wreathed, the ruined fortress stared at him across the bleak seascape. But as he watched, a man emerged from a dark space between two stone columns. Someone in camouflage pants and a dark sweater.

I'll be damned, he thought. Then he wondered if he should retreat. But Mark had seen him. *Why would you want to turn back, anyway?* he asked himself.

"Where *don't* you turn up?" Randall yelled to him, jumping from the stone onto a soft patch of grass. "How did you get out here?"

"I paid someone to bring me over!" Mark shouted back.

Randall was breathing heavily when he reached Mark, blinking beads of moisture from his eyelashes. Mark looked him up and down, from his bare, mud-splattered legs to his wet face. "But you seem to enjoy doing things the hard way. You're soaked." Then he gave Randall a shove. "Come on. Let's see what there is to see."

Together, they tramped around the perimeter of the fort, stuck their heads through narrow casements, whistled at the view. They talked casually, as though long acquainted. Mark said he had come over yesterday on the early boat.

"What about your girlfriend?" Randall asked. "Is she with you?"

"Girlfriend?" Mark looked up from a fallen lintel piece with scrolled edges.

"You know, the woman who was with you on Inishmore. Up on the cliffs at Dún Aenghus."

Mark shrugged. "I just met her the day before, in Galway. She left the island with some friends that afternoon."

They climbed over a heap of blocks fallen into the inner courtyard, discovered a rampart running to the top of a tower's battlement. The wall's seaward side fell straight to a narrow curve of ground that separated the fort from a cliff plunging to the sea. "Can you believe even Cromwell would bother building a fort on such a God-forsaken island?" Mark asked. "How much can one man hate Catholics?"

"Apparently a great deal. He filled this place with Catholics that were later shipped off to the West Indies. It was called a barracks, in his day."

"By God, though, what a view." Mark threw his arms wide and revolved in a full circle. "Makes you want to go flying out there, you know? Just once, right into the heart of that black freezing ocean." As Randall stared down, the fog parted to reveal the water's surface. Like snakes with heads at both ends, the sea coiled endlessly around moss-covered boulders.

"So is that why you wouldn't talk to me on Inishmore and in Sligo? Because you thought I was with a woman? Or was it that you really didn't want to talk with me?"

Randall sat down on a flat stone in the tower's ruined crenellation, swung his legs over the edge. Gripping the stone, he felt no fear of the long drop beneath him. Was it Mark's presence?

"It wasn't for either reason, really," he began slowly. "When you're on your own, traveling, it's hard to know . . ." he paused, thinking. "Hard to know when someone really wants your company." He turned to look at Mark. "Know what I mean?"

"Do I know?" Mark straddled the wall like it was a horse, facing Randall. "Hell, ain't I here alone, too? It's the same for everyone."

"Sure it is, to an extent. But that night in Sligo, I was . . . well, self-absorbed." He laughed and shook his head, still looking down at the sea. "I guess you could say I've been self-absorbed for a couple of years."

"Absorbed in what was bothering you in Sligo?" Randall opened his mouth to stop him, but Mark waved his hand. "Don't be so touchy. Crowds don't agree with

me, either. But, man, you looked like you were ready to shake your skin right off your bones that night. I thought that—"

"Don't!" Randall shouted. He wanted to say *Don't make fun of me*, but he realized how absurd the words would sound. For a moment he looked into Mark's upturned face, then he turned to jump to the floor of the passage. But as he leaped, the slab of stone shifted beneath him. He bent his knees, trying to push forward, but gravity pulled him back, toward the sea. He threw up one arm, saw the sky arching high above, felt caught by blue.

"Careful there, partner." Mark put one arm around Randall's shoulders and pulled at the front of his shirt with his free hand. "You've got to be careful stomping around these damn old castles."

They jumped off the wall and went back to the center court. In an open place clear of rubble, they sat down and shared their food. Mark had brought a thermos of tea, Randall some apples and bread. The fog evaporated as they ate, leaving the sea blinking up in green mirrors at a blinding sun. They took off their sweaters and shirts and laid them out to dry, finished the tea as they complained about carrying damp clothes in their packs.

"Seems that you don't get many moments like this in Ireland," Mark mused. He arched his back, lifting his chest toward the heat. He talked about hitchhiking and his job in Ohio, but eventually fell silent. Randall saw that his eyes were closed, his face tilted up, absorbing the heat. "I've been wishing I'd gone some place warmer," Mark murmured, his eyes still closed. "But this seems like a moment worth waiting for."

By the time they had their gear packed up, the tide was rising. When they reached the short crescent of beach, they found that the stream dividing it had broadened into a channel several feet across. "We basked together like lizards for too long," Mark said absently. They hopped from one boulder to another, weighing their options. "Look there. We can jump over the channel at the narrowest part of this damn flume." Mark pointed to where the spar of rock nearly joined the opposite side. Water churned in white foam through the aperture.

Randall followed him onto a flat rock shelf, water splashing around his legs. "I can't jump that far," he said, backing away from the edge. "You go ahead. I'll go back to the shallowest part and just crash through it."

"Hell you will," Mark snorted. "It's ten feet deep back there and that current's like a train. It'll drive you right into these rocks. You can make the jump. I'll go first and give you a hand if you need it." Without another word, Mark took three steps back, then lunged for the gap. Randall knew at once it was no good. Mark stretched his arms forward to compensate for the bad launch, but gravity defeated him all at once. The toe of his left boot came down on the far ledge, but the other one missed by several inches. He went down into the swirling water, then bobbed up a second later, both hands groping at the stone's smooth edge.

Slowly, Randall backed away from the edge, stopping only when his back pressed against a high boulder. He heard Mark calling out, watched him clawing for a solid hold. *Space enough for three long strides before reaching the edge*, he thought. And the next step would take him out into the spray. When he leapt from the rock, he spread his legs into a wide triangle, extending one arm before him across the rift, the other behind. His forward foot landed squarely on the far shelf, his second one just barely on the edge. In another second he was belly-down on the rock, reaching with both arms toward the rushing current.

"Need any help down there?" he yelled.

“I’m drowning, pal!” Mark choked back, hanging by one hand from a knob of stone. “Get me out! These blasted stones are too smooth for me to climb up.”

Randall caught Mark’s free arm and clamped both his hands around the wrist. He pulled, but the dead weight barely moved. Cursing, he let go of Mark’s wrist with one hand to reach farther down, groping for a handhold on the cold skin of Mark’s back.

“Let go of the rock, Mark,” he gasped. “Pull yourself up my arm with both your hands. I can’t get ahold of you to lift you any higher.”

When Mark obeyed, the burden of his full weight nearly brought Randall over the edge. But as he slid forward, the toe of one shoe hooked into a hole in the rock and held him secure. Mark climbed hand-over-hand, using Randall’s arm like a rope, until Randall got his fingers around his belt and heaved upward. With one long final pull from Randall, Mark began inching forward along the rock like a great seal.

“Damn!” he laughed, rolling over on his back. He shook his head, spitting water from his mouth. “I thought I was one dumb drowned tourist. Thanks.”

“You would have made it without me,” Randall said, shaking through his whole body.

“Maybe,” Mark answered. Lifting himself to his knees, he doubled over and coughed up more water. “Maybe not.” On all fours, he shook his body like a dog, water flying from his beard and the mat of hair on his chest. Then they climbed down the rocks and walked across the disappearing beach to the first field.

“Ever think of losing a pound or two?” Randall asked, poking Mark in the stomach. “Might make you easier to pull out of the drink next time, if you plan on making a habit of it.”

“Hey,” sucking in his gut, putting his hand flat against his abdomen. “That’s all muscle, pal. Besides, who wants to look like they spend their life in a gym?”

“You seem to be in small danger of that,” Randall said, slapping him on the back. “Let’s get back before the afternoon rain starts. Come on.” He broke into a slow jog.

“Sounds good,” Mark said. “I do believe I’m thirsty for an early Guiness.”

Randall nodded, then thought about sitting in a crowded pub. Would his enemy be there, too? The one that had shadowed him through Ireland? After the last two perfect hours, did he want Mark to see him overtaken by neurosis? His heart beat faster as he picked up speed crossing the field. He looked up, saw that Ireland was nearing the end of its daily ration of sun. Clear sky was losing its struggle against rain-bearing clouds. But the interval of sunshine had dried out the long grass in the fields, filled the air with the odor of flowers and manure and grass. He stopped to look behind for Mark, saw the rift they had vaulted overflowing with water, coursing away from the sea to an inland lake.

Don’t worry so damn much, he told himself. *Are you going to wait until this is all over before you have a beer with a new friend again? Could be a long wait.*

“Hurry it up,” Mark yelled. “My guess is the next downpour’s about five minutes away.”

Randall eyes followed Mark’s form as he ran past him.

Could I be the mortal man desired by fifty sisters from the ocean’s depths? he wondered. *If I stood alone on the half-deck of a one-masted ship, oars lying idle, would they rise from the sea to find me? Floating coral anemones, their heads would break above the waves. Groping fifty paths past the shields lining the bulwarks, they would pull themselves up the sides with long-fingered hands. Over*

the wooden decks they would pour, their sea-crystal robes floating up the rigging like swaying bells. As the ship's prow slipped beneath the waves, taking the loved man forever to their caves and grottos, their kisses would run down his chest and legs like streams of icy water.

As Randall broke into a trot again, the rift they had vaulted overflowed with water, Beyond the spur of rock, far from the two running men, Cromwell's fortress stood barren, a spent black star keeping watch against armies that would never arrive.

From Lunenburg to Shelburne, N. S.

At the intersection of Route 88 and Town Landing Road, I stopped at the small grocery—not a convenience store—on the right side of the road. I had ridden past it on my bicycle several times before, but even now, after stopping in once, I still don't know its name. I doubt that many people do. In the custom of Maine natives, people refer to it by landmarks. The store at the corner where you turn off the highway to go down to the harbor in Falmouth-Foreside, down the road that dips sharply and twists at a crazy angle. Screen doors in unpainted frames swung loosely at the top of three rough steps. When I entered, a large dog was lying on the floor in front of the cash register. With red and yellow masses of curly, matted hair, it looked something like a Yorkshire terrier, but several times larger. I halted near the door, wary. One year when I was a graduate student, I lived about three miles from campus, in a lower-income area of Urbana, Illinois. I don't know if that had any connection with the abundance of mean dogs, but that year I was chased by dogs several times. And less than a month before I moved to a different part of town, I was bitten by a white plug of a brute covered with dirt stains and patches of scabbed, livid skin. But the dog in the grocery store seemed placid enough, anchored in a mass to the planked, dusty floor just beneath a mechanical cash register. It sighed heavily as I approached, and I stepped over its tail carefully, heading for the single freezer case against the far wall.

I wanted Gatorade. The previous summer, biking through Nova Scotia, I had discovered that the Gatorade commercials tell the truth: it really is the best drink when you're exerting yourself over a long period. Today, however, I had barely worked up a sweat covering the nine miles between the grocery and my apartment on the east side of Portland. Compared to the fifty-nine miles per day that I had averaged in Nova Scotia, this was nothing. And my mileage record had been set in a long cruise from Lunenburg to Shelburne. Fighting a relentless downpour, I held my breath as tractor trailers roared by in huge clouds of mist and fog that made my front tire vanish from sight. That was the only day in Nova Scotia when a Gatorade stop had not seemed appealing. Between Lunenburg and Shelburne, what I craved was a cup of coffee and a bowl of hot soup. That, and my bed and breakfast at the end of the road.

❖❖❖

I underestimated the distance between Lunenburg, where I spent a long, sunny afternoon filled with music from local folk artists, and Shelburne, which I

saw only after dark and at sunrise the next day. When I reached Shelburne's city limits, my odometer read 82.78 miles, far over the mileage I had figured. Wolfing down broiled sea scallops the size of golf balls at Shelburne's Privateer's Inn, I scanned the notes I had taken before leaving Portland, trying to discover the source of my error. I consulted the mileage chart on my map, rechecked my conversions from kilometers to miles, tried again to estimate the miles I had saved by taking a route that crossed the La Have River by ferry. But I suddenly threw down my pen and laughed aloud, realizing I had spent twenty minutes fussing over an inconsequential mistake when something else, an incident that had occurred only a few hours earlier, had seemed, at the time, crushing. I had actually forgotten about it. I laughed again, unable to control it, then bent furtively over my notes, hoping the other diners would think I was reading something hilarious. I decided to have another scotch, to congratulate myself for forgetting.

I had started to have suspicions that my mileage estimate was low early in the day. Turning away from musical Lunenburg onto Grimm's Settlement Road, a short-cut to Route 331 and the ferry crossing, a long-familiar feeling that something was wrong crept into me. I wish I could remember an occasion when that sudden feeling of vague alarm proved to be faulty. I can certainly remember plenty of times when it turned out to be all too accurate. As Lunenburg faded in the distance, the jittery disquiet in the pit of my stomach grew. Maybe it was just that Grimm's Road was desolate, deserted of people and other vehicles, the fields that stretched to the horizon obscured with a low, gray fog that had rolled up the river valley during the night. A few times the road's pavement disintegrated into a mixture of dirt and cracked slabs of macadam, forcing me to slow down even as the desire to cover ground fast became stronger and stronger. Overhead, the skies tenuously held back an ocean of rain. I had arrived in Yarmouth five days ago, in mid-August of one of the rainiest summers on record for the Northeast, but not a drop had fallen on me yet in Nova Scotia. I knew, though, that this lucky spell was over as I alternated between speeding down Grimm's Road and bumping my way across craggy pavement. The storm was rolling up the province from Yarmouth, and locals had told me the day before that storms this like always work their way slowly all the way to the end of Cape Breton Island. Intricate maneuvers in the air currents that I didn't understand cause these storms to hug the inland coast in a long ridge, preventing them from being dragged out to sea. I looked up at thick, churning clouds and thought that at least I was going in the right direction. I might get lucky and zip through a curtain of rain and come out the other side into a sunny day. My stomach juices, always an early warning system for incoming misfortune, roiled painfully. But it wasn't only the weather that had set off the signals. I knew something else lay ahead.

I tried to ignore the premonition, to think instead about Lunenburg. My day there had been unique in my trip, in more ways than one. First, it was the only day when the distance I had to cover was insignificant, leaving me enough time to slow down and enjoy the scenery. Second, I stumbled upon a major music festival. All day long, Lunenburg was harmonic with music. Down at the harbor, locally famous singers played intermittently at the end of a pier. There was an admission charge to enter, a price too high for my budget, but I could hear just as well from the shore, trolling around on my bike in lazy circles amid other music poachers. Up in the town square, lesser celebrities played for free in a large gazebo surrounded by crowds spread thickly across the sloping lawns between the courthouse and a cemetery. As the day wore on, I toggled between the harbor and gazebo,

sometimes alone, sometimes talking with another onlooker, leaving one place when a break was announced, hearing the strains of new music as I pedaled back to the other site.

Finally, Grimm's Settlement Road ended at Route 331 with a panoramic view of the La Have River. My only views of water that day started there, ending when I biked north from the river after the fording. But for a long time the La Have flowed beside me, mere inches from the road's edge, dusky green and choppy.

A few miles after I disembarked from the ferry that rides on rails set into the river bed, the rain finally started, slow but insistent. It was a cold rain, as cold as one you might get in October or early November in Maine, and I shuddered as I felt the air temperature drop in turn. It's funny how we become so accustomed to avoiding rain that we almost forget that once you're soaked, you're pretty much on equal footing with the rain gods. Still, long-distance biking in a downpour was a new experience for me, and for a while I slowed down to a maximum of ten to twelve miles per hour. But after traveling a mile or so without incident, I reverted to my usual patterns, riding like hell down hills, getting up to twenty-five, thirty-five miles per hour, flattening out my body and bringing in my elbows to cut down on wind drag, knowing there was bound to be an upgrade after the coast and preparing for it with a good head of steam—anything to maximize the easy stretches and minimize the ball-busters. Occasionally I wondered exactly how much easier it was to skid out of control on a wet road than on a dry one. Still, I only used extra caution when going through towns where I might have to stop suddenly for traffic and for stretches of road covered with gravel and stones.

It was too early for a break when I stopped at Broad Cove, but the simple need for a little warmth was strong as I rounded a bend and caught sight of a small inn with a white picket fence and flower-strewn trellises. On the front lawn, a sign said "Fine Breakfasts, Lunches and Dinners Daily. Excellent Seafood." As if any restaurant in Nova Scotia needed the second sentence. I had left Lunenburg before seven and had felt no hunger at breakfast, not even for coffee. The strange lack of morning appetite was another side-effect of long distance biking that I had not expected, one that had begun my first morning on the road. In a B and B in Church Point, sixty miles north of Yarmouth on the Evangeline Trail, I had sat down to a huge French-Canadian breakfast and looked at the food with indifference, almost aversion. After all the exercise of the previous day, I was dumbfounded. I had fully expected to eat like a Viking every morning. Remembering that I couldn't afford to pass up food included in the cost of my room, I forced myself to eat a waffle and drink some coffee, but that was all I could manage. Only about two hours later, however, hunger pangs hit me so acutely that I stopped at Plympton, just a few miles before the turn-off for Digby Neck, and ate ravenously at the first restaurant I could find.

After that day, I learned that if I forced down as much as I could at breakfast, a couple slices of toast and oatmeal around 10 AM would see me through to lunch, but at mid-afternoon and in the evening I was always famished. I once ate two entire entrees for dinner, plus an appetizer. But when my trip ended and I was back in my apartment, safe in the land of material comforts and familiar routines, I weighed myself and discovered that despite my epic meals in Nova Scotia, I had lost eleven pounds. This was not welcome news, since I had started the trip underweight, worn down to less than 150 pounds on my six-foot, one-inch frame by a long semester of teaching, research, and administrative work. Friends looked at me oddly, then laughed, asking if I had stopped bicycling long enough to eat. I

laughed in return, telling them that I had eaten, in fact, like a Roman tyrant. But I knew their questions referred to something more serious, something not funny. Most of my friends seem to think that my biking trips are mildly perverse, symptomatic of what they see as my anti-social behavior. Maybe even flavored with a need for self-punishment. I suppose they're right. Or half-right, at least, because they can't see the whole picture. And that makes them worse than half-right.

Perhaps it was the slight awkwardness I always feel in B and B's, in addition to some quirky somatic reaction to the heavy exercise, that knocked me off my feed. No matter how clean or quaint or charming a particular night's stop might be, no matter how good the food and other creature comforts, I always feel that I'm lurking on the periphery of a family unit, a spy in the prison of domesticity. Perhaps my long years of living alone simply made me too sensitive to the annoying maneuvers required for fitting my body and its habits into a space shared by other people. Being in a B and B always makes me realize how I range around my apartment at will, blasting off insults at my cat, engaging in behavior that to me seems normal, even light-hearted, but that I would shield from the world at all costs. So a single night in a B and B makes me feel constrained, as though I must be on my best behavior, even though it earns no reward. And I may be too cynical, but I suspect that B and B proprietors learn quickly that they can exploit the liminal, off-center feeling that affects their guests. (Or many of their guests? Some? A handful of misfits like me?) B and B's never have clear-cut rules—not more than a few basic stipulations, anyway. You know you get a room to sleep in and a breakfast in the morning and that if you get lucky at a local bar you'd better not drag your discovery home with you in the middle of the night. Beyond that, everything is subject to awkward and vague negotiation. Is it acceptable to take a shower at midnight when everyone else is asleep? May one go into the kitchen to get a glass of ice water at will? If you come home from dinner wanting to read for an hour or so and find the husband and wife settled into the only living room, do you assertively find a chair and incorporate yourself into the domestic scene or do you murmur good-night and decently get out of sight as quickly as possible? In Bridgewater, Nova Scotia's third most populous city, I found myself in a renovated Victorian mansion with rooms so smothered with antiques that I walked through them on tip-toe. When I first arrived, I requested to put my water bottle in the refrigerator overnight. The owner and manager, a woman who had been overly friendly up to that point, caught her breath sharply, as though not completely familiar with the benefits of refrigeration, then gave me a long, appraising look between narrowed eyelids. After several tense seconds, she finally said she thought it might be all right.

Entering the inn at Broad Cove, I was struck again by the feeling that my body was inappropriate to the situation. Walking into a cheap lunch counter in my bicycle gear was one thing, but this inn was all polished woodwork and linen napkins. Standing in the front door, dripping wet in my purple-and-black bibbed tunic, a blue bandanna wrapped around my head, struggling to peel off my soaked leather gloves—cheap ones that were too tight and made my fingertips swell—I thought maybe I should try to retreat gracefully. This haven for tea parties and quiet dinners shared by affable senior citizens clearly was not prepared for a biker looking hungry and desperate. But the matron who welcomed me, white-haired and splendid in a genuine ruffled apron, seemed to take no note of my appearance. I followed her to a table in the empty dining room, my duck feet clacking loudly on the hardwood floor. Normally when I stopped for a meal, I would slip off the

special biking shoes and put on sneakers before entering the restaurant, because the clips in their soles that lock into my Shimano pedals—this was the year before the SPD compatibles came out with their recessed clips—make the shoes noisy and hard to walk in. But with my socks soaked, I didn't want to switch into my dry sneakers, so I walked behind her. Squish-tap, squish-tap.

"Wait just one minute and I'll bring a candle for you," the woman said. "The power went off a few minutes ago and it's so dark today. Heavens, right in the middle of August! But we have an old propane stove in the kitchen and I can make you anything you want. Don't use it much anymore, but it's handy to have when something like this happens."

I sat in my wet clothes staring at the yellow candle flame burning at the center of a pink tablecloth, drinking coffee and eating two English muffins and vegetable beef soup, trying not to think about the money I was wasting by not tanking up on food at my B and B's. The day grew steadily darker as I stared through a rain-splattered window divided into eight small panes, thinking about the ride to come, wishing that the tidy woman would come back into the dining room, pull up a chair, and talk with me while I ate. But I knew that she would find that indecorous, despite how different I looked from her typical patrons. Or maybe because of that.

About an hour later, approaching East Medway, I was thinking "You won't get less soaked the faster you go, you know." The village flashed by—a dip down, a white steepled church on one corner, a cluster of houses plain except for their bright primary colors, a steep rise up from main street—and I pondered my options for the rest of the ride. In another few miles, I would come to the intersection of scenic Route 331, the Lighthouse Trail, and Route 103, the south shore's major expressway. From that point, 103 makes a bee line for Shelburne, staying inland all the way, while the Lighthouse Trail hugs the shore until meeting up with 103 again in Liverpool. So far, I had spurned the efficiency of well-planned highways, determined to be leisurely, to see the sights. After Liverpool, 103 merges with the Lighthouse Trail until the exit at Sable River, just a few miles east of Shelburne, so I had no choice but to take 103 for the long stretch from Liverpool to my final stop. But opting for 103 from East Medway to Liverpool, despite the rain, seemed cowardly, a violation of biking purity.

And then there was the fear factor. Rural roads present dangers of their own type, but they seemed less definite, less immediate, than the certainty of wind vortexes generated by screaming semis and roaring cars on Route 103. And what about my sudden presentiment of doom on Grimm's Settlement Road? Could it have been a warning to stick with the slower, safer roads? I imagined my corpse lying in a lake of bloody rainwater at the center of a tangle of police cars, flattened on the pavement like Wile E. Coyote against the side of a cliff, my identification cards a sodden, illegible lump. Could the difference between taking the Lighthouse Trail or 103 mean the difference between toppling over in a huge pothole or being squashed into oblivion by an oil tanker? Come to think of it, how long would it take the people back in Maine to know I was dead? Should I have anticipated becoming unidentifiable roadkill before leaving the states and not bothering to tell anyone the particulars of my trip? But I was cold, damn it, and the downpour seemed unending. Not a moment's reprieve since leaving the inn at Broad Cove. I had no rain clothing with me, for I had accumulated all my bicycle gear from scratch the month before leaving Portland, and after dropping fifty bucks a shot every time I walked into Bay Cycle or Top Speed Bicycle, I had decided, in regard to possible

disasters, to let fate have its way with me. Besides, I know now, more than a year after my flight down 103 in Nova Scotia, that even the best rain gear is nearly worthless. In a real downpour, you might as well ride naked, if you can stand the cold.

Screw neurotic worries, I thought. If I get creamed, it won't be my problem when I don't show up to teach Introduction to Linguistics at the end of August. "So long, Lighthouse Trail," I said aloud. Visions of my colleagues' perplexed faces when I didn't return swirled past me in the rain. "So long hidden coves and rocky points I'll never see." I hustled up the steep entrance ramp to 103, then bore down on the pedals hooked to my feet, pulling up hard from my hamstrings. At least I can put up a good show before the inevitable and grisly end, I thought. Like a confirmation, a tractor trailer came up behind me almost before I was off the ramp. Brown, mud-caked sides, bare of fancy paint job or lettering, it looked like something pieced together by post-apocalyptic desperados. I gripped the handlebars, leaning away from the strong air vacuum trying to pull me under the nine wheels; mist and rain churned up by the rig hit me in the face like a pailful of water. I coughed and sputtered. My lunch stop in Liverpool was only fifteen miles away, but Shelburne lay another forty miles beyond that. I thought of the title of an old British film starring the very young Michael Courtenay. In college, pounding along on endless marathon runs, my skinny, striated legs feeling like steel bands about to snap, I would repeat the title to myself like a mantra: "*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*." Was there an equivalent for bikers? Films about running, endurance, the road. What ever happened to Michael Courtenay? Had he died young? I thought of a dozen more films that fit the criteria as I grimly bore down on Liverpool, alternating the new game with my usual mental hobby of searching for ideas for new horror stories. An ancient, lonely sea-monster skulks around the rocky shores of Nova Scotia, searching for a soulmate. He's a beat-up old wreck of a dragon whom 'Nessie' and 'Champ,' the sleek and well-groomed monsters of Loch Ness and Lake Champlain, vain of their celebrity, have both scorned. Or maybe . . . In the ruins of Ti-Kal in Guatemala, two American tourists, one a bored, thrill-seeking neurosurgeon, the other her cowardly-but-ultimately-courageous bisexual companion/ex-lover, an under-appreciated fellow she keeps dragging around the world with her because he can always find her passport in one minute after she has ransacked her luggage (and his) looking for it and is just about to scream with frustration or maybe belt him one for no better reason than he is more organized than she is—besides, he carries bank cards with hefty credit limits and she always loses hers one or two days into a trip—anyway, they sneak into the park at night and climb to the peak of the Temple of the Great Jaguar, one of two facing pyramids at opposite ends of the Great Plaza. For decades, tourists have been forbidden to climb the edifice, supposedly (eek!) because the ancient stone steps have eroded too severely to be ascended safely. There, standing before the inter-locked temple chambers at the pyramid's apex, both oblivious to the immortal Mayan evil dormant for centuries in the hollow roof comb, the woman shining her flashlight on the sacred jaguar inscription, so eroded that it can only be glimpsed from the top of the opposite pyramid, the one in the doltish Nike commercial, at certain times of day—the jungle night hot and fragrant, the cries of exotic night birds raucous, our hero (yes, I'm warming up to the luckless flunky) agonized with repressed desire for the doctor's sleek, well-toned body, caught in yet another crisis of sexual orientation chaos, knowing full well that she would

knock him right off that pyramid without a second thought if he so much as laid one hand on the back of her slender, sun-browned neck.

Exit 19. Liverpool. Four kilometers. My odometer clock read 10:45. I had made good time, despite the endless rain. I pressed the mode button on the speedometer to read my average speed since hooking up with 103. Sixteen miles per hour. Lower than I expected, but for several miles I climbed an endless upgrade, something I had been warned about by a biker I had met up with in Lunenburg.

"103 starts going uphill just west of East Medway," he had said, "and it doesn't stop until past Shelburne. It's not steep, and you'll hit a few short downslopes, but it climbs forever. You'll feel it in your legs after a while, believe me."

Looking at his legs, I believed him. They weren't much more muscled than mine, but they had that definition that only comes from hundreds of miles run or biked, muscling that seems all vertical and elongated. Two defined veins ran up the backs of his legs from ankle to thigh; the calves were pronounced, but not bulky. He and I—his name was Carroll—were eating an early lunch, sitting at a dime-sized table outside a café, each of us pleased to have connected with a fellow biker, self-satisfied with our separate achievements, feeling different from the other tourists milling around us on the esplanade facing Lunenburg's sail-flecked harbor. I never felt lonely in Nova Scotia, but that was the only moment of camaraderie I was to feel on my trip.

Liverpool turned out to be my first city in Nova Scotia with a distinct working-class flavor. Lunenburg, Annapolis Royal, Middleton—all had been picture-perfect, decked out in August for the enjoyment of tourists, much like Portland's Old Port and Portsmouth's famous harbor area. Nova Scotia's Yarmouth and Bridgewater, larger cities, are less overtly groomed to make a good impression, but still clean and friendly. Nearing what seemed to be the major intersection in central Liverpool, scanning the storefronts for a lunch stop in the right price range, I was reminded more of grimy, energetic Munjoy Hill, my own working-class neighborhood on Portland's East Side, than of Portland's refurbished Old Port or the upscale but over-rated West Side. As in Munjoy Hill, small shops and a few large manufacturers were interspersed in Liverpool with huge frame houses converted into apartment buildings, their paint jobs dark and peeling. Front doors were flung open, offering glimpses of dark hallways. People were sitting on front stoops, holding babies and shouting at small children running around the sidewalks. I parked my bike in front of a diner called The Liverpool Lunch Pail. A few minutes ago, as I exited the highway, the rain had finally come to a complete halt. The eastern sky was still a lead helmet, but a few diagonal stripes of diffuse yellow broke the clouds in the west. I clattered around the sidewalk for a few minutes, stretching my arms and resisting the urge to rub my rear end, looking at the sky and hoping the storm had broken for good. As if in answer, a three-headed mass of cloud cover split right down the middle, bright yellow sunlight shooting down as clear and sharp as short declarative sentences.

Tri-cephalic, I thought, grinning to myself. I looked up at the sun, thinking of something I needed to read in Latin when I got back to Portland. Maybe it was the dread provoked by the dwindling distance between me and medieval Latin or maybe just the sight of a huge yellow sun at the center of a ragged circle of clouds, but I suddenly ripped off the oversize T-shirt I had put on as a coverall way back on Grimm's Settlement Road, then slid the tunic straps off my bare shoulders and

pulled off my soaked sleeveless T-shirt, the one I had worn every day since starting my trip. I stretched some more, the hot sun like balm, and flexed my hands, which were throbbing. My bicycle has the type of gear shift that is built into the hand-grips. To change gears, you only need a short twist of the wrist, but that action hits the large nerve ending in your palm every single time. Even with expensive gloves, your hands can feel crabbed, almost paralyzed, after a long trip. Wearing cheap gloves, I had learned quickly how to minimize the impact on the nerves, but I couldn't prevent it completely.

I slung the two shirts over my bike, hitched the straps on my bib back up on my shoulders, and began unfastening my panniers so that I could carry them with me into the restaurant. My black knapsack and my kryptonite lock were strapped down to the rear carrier. When these were free, I paused and looked around, holding the lock in one hand. The last time I had used it was on the car deck in the *Scotia Prince* coming over to Yarmouth from Portland. Once in Nova Scotia, I had felt too safe to bother with it. It even occurred to me that I might insult the natives if I scrupulously locked up the bicycle everywhere I parked. Instead, whenever I stopped for lunch or a quick Gatorade break, I positioned the bike where it would be visible while I was inside. But standing on the sidewalk in Liverpool, surveying the street and the passersby, I thought of the small tool bag strapped to the seat post, something I had never considered removing before. My only flashlight, an expensive multi-tool, and my patch kit were stored in that bag. And my passport was stashed in the bag's hidden pocket. Then I looked at my front wheel, which could be removed from the fork in seconds. Back in graduate school, when I had owned an expensive magnesium Peugot racer, I wouldn't have left my bike anywhere for a second without locking it up and removing both wheels and the saddle. Was I prejudiced to consider stripping down my bike completely? Or had I been stupid all along not to be cautious? Theft of all types is always high in touristy spots, I thought. But I argued to myself that I would be able to see the bike from inside the restaurant. I could even sit at a table where it would only be inches away, separated from me by a plate-glass window. While I reflected, I opened up one pannier and found a dry shirt. I set it on the handlebars, then began fishing for my keys at the bottom of a side pouch on the right pannier.

"Lock it up but leave the tool kit and the wheel. Compromise," I muttered to myself.

"Hey!"

I heard the voice coming from just a few yards away, but I continued working. I told myself the voice wasn't hailing me, but I knew it was. My stomach jumped, and I suddenly remembered the first leap of warning, hours ago, on Grimm's Settlement Road. I shoved aside small articles in the pouch, wanting to feel the metal of keys.

"Hey, you! Biker!"

I looked up. A few houses down the street, a woman was standing in front of a mixed gang of children and teenagers. She was in her late twenties or early thirties, holding a cigarette in one hand and a can of beer in the other. Where were the stupid keys? All my gear had an appointed place and every night after dinner I ran inventory, so I knew the keys were properly stowed, but now they were gone. I stood up, thwarted, confused, looking stupidly at the panniers. Trying to ignore the woman, an image of the hapless, frustrated expression on my face made me think of the day, back in graduate school, that Buster tore a chunk of skin and flesh from my arm. Like today, I had known on that morning that misfortune lay ahead.

Most days when I passed Buster's house—I learned his name after the attack, when the police became involved—he would be hiding in a low, screened enclosure on the front lawn of a shabby ranch house surrounded by junked cars. But sometimes he would see me coming and throw himself at the fence, barking madly, his short back legs scrabbling in the dirt inside his cage, his square, flat face like a clenched fist. I knew instinctively he would bite me if he had the chance. One hot summer evening when I walked past the house, I saw two men sitting in lawn chairs in the gravel driveway. Buster was snuffling in the dirt around the perimeter of his kennel. But when he sighted me, he went through his usual tirade of hurling himself against the fence, howling with fury. The men watched wordlessly while I observed both them and Buster, wondering what type of people could be so indifferent to their dog's hostility, much less force it to live in such inhumane conditions. When they saw me staring at them, one man tossed an empty beer can over his shoulder into the open garage, then flipped me the finger, grinning. Just as surely that I sensed the dog was a biter, I knew that someday I would walk past that house and he would be loose. I told myself I was being fatalistic, but I frequently avoided walking past Buster's house even when it was convenient to do so. I told myself not to be a coward, that the dog was securely locked up, that many people keep mean dogs. But I never turned onto Buster's street without a tightened gut. I seriously considered packing a hamburger patty with rat poison and tossing it into his prison.

One winter morning, I woke up late for an early class. I hustled along the most direct route to campus, even though it took me past Buster's lair. As I approached the house, my stomach turned over in one heavy mass, like a batch of unkneaded dough. My face flooded with sweat and I halted, wondering if I should turn back. But it was too late. Ahead, the dog was trotting quietly from the garage. He stopped to sniff at some brown snow, then turned his head in my direction. He froze. Through the clear, raw air, I saw his strong body begin to quiver as he watched me with black eyes like a lion taking bead on an antelope. In another second, he was flying at me in one long running dive. As he leaped high into the air, I stepped back, raising my arms to fend off the assault. But he sunk his teeth through my thick winter coat and deep into my arm just below the shoulder. I expected him to strike again, but he immediately let go of my arm, fell to the ground on his hindquarters, then scrambled up and fled down the street, his soiled white fur melting into the snow-dusted street. Blinking, I looked around the scene of the attack. At seven in the morning, the world was still peacefully asleep. Grey daylight was just breaking through the bare ruined choirs of winter trees. I looked at the hole in my sleeve. The torn edges framed a ragged wound in my January-white skin that puddled up with blood as I watched.

"Think you're hot stuff, huh?" the woman yelled again. She sounded closer. I forced away thoughts of Buster, wondered if I should turn to face her.

"You think he's cute, really?" She spoke to another woman standing nearby. "Scrawny, I'd say!" Raucous laughter, followed by some heavy coughing. Her voice was hard and piercing, empty of humor. I glanced sideways in her direction. Supporters had gathered around her, trading laughs and comments. She whipped back her long, brown hair and swallowed from her beer. I glimpsed a black halter top above a pair of tight jeans. She must have seen me sneaking a look, because she turned around and wiggled her bottom at me. I finally found the keys in the other pannier, swearing under my breath. But my hands were shaking as I zipped

up the pouch, and they fell to the pavement, skittering several yards away. When I bent over to get them, a chorus of whistles and hollers went up behind me.

"Hey, nice ass!" called out a new voice, also female. It had the same cheerless, baiting tone as the first one. I wondered if I should turn around and say thanks, try to turn the tide, show them I could take a joke. Then a male voice, rough like a wool blanket, smothered the conspiratorial laughter.

"You think you're hot shit, faggot? On that bike? I'll punch your fucking face in, asshole!"

My lock was in place around a parking meter. I slammed the big U into the twin sockets in the straight bar and twisted the key. Then I began grabbing things at random. The wet T-shirts, the two panniers, my knapsack, bungee cords. "Shit!" I hissed. My clean, dry shirt was still sitting on the handlebars. I dumped everything down again and plucked it up, unfolding it with one hard snap. But when I lifted my arms up above my head to slip it over my tunic, more calls and whistles came from the pack up the street.

"Nice stuff, babe!"

"Get lost, fag!"

"Hey, come on over! Andy's got something he wants to give you!"

Different words, all in different voices. But they were all saying the same thing, like the birds in *Yvain, The Knight with the Lion*, the birds that cover the pine tree and serenade Calogrenant, King Arthur's knight, after the magical tempest. 'Doucement li oisel chantoient,' the romance says. 'Et divers chanz chantoit chascuns, c'onques ce que chantoit li uns a l'autre chanter ne oi. The birds were singing softly, and each sang a different song, so that I never heard one sing what the other was singing.' I could recall the lines exactly because in an essay I had finished days before leaving Portland, I argued that the differentiation of the songs makes the reader think, paradoxically, of a single song, a synthesis, a common language for the birds. Like the unified language of hate from the several voices up the street.

I gathered up my things and walked into the restaurant. The ongoing shivaree now seemed so distant and abstract that I didn't even hurry. My body was tense as a guy wire, but the fear had dissolved suddenly, decisively. Already, it seemed that the incident had endured for hours, days, leaving me exhausted. I didn't care if they followed me into the restaurant, didn't care if they came and hooted at me through the front window. Inside, The Lunch Pail was dry and warm with bright surfaces and a clean tile floor. I looked around for a place to sit.

"Not a good day for bicycling, eh?"

A heavy woman in a blue fitted uniform bustled up to me. Her brown hair was pulled back neatly under a tiny cap. She was smiling.

"Guess not," I answered. The voice was a bit raspy and I needed my handkerchief. "But sometimes you don't get a choice."

She asked me where I had started, where I was going. I told her, and she whistled.

"I don't know why you people do it," she laughed. "Not my idea of fun! But maybe it would be if I was in shape like you. Sit in that booth over there," she ordered. "It's by the heater. Maybe you'll dry out a little." She laughed again, openly looking me up and down. Then she shook her head and hurried away. "Get you a menu now," she said over her shoulder.

The hot turkey sandwich with gravy and mashed potatoes tasted great. Nancy, the waitress, made frequent stops at my table. Once she leaned against the

back of a chair and we talked about *Twin Peaks*, which had just been re-run on a local station. She said she loved the show, but she still didn't understand who killed Laura Palmer. Was it Bob or was it Laura's father? she asked me. And who *was* Bob, really? She seemed to think I ought to know.

After paying my check at the counter, I slipped two ten-dollar bills underneath my plate. Outside, cold rain fell again as I unlocked my bike.

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Gatorade secured, I left the grocery whose name I still don't know and rode my bike down Town Landing Road to the long pier with its two floating docks in Falmouth-Foreside. Slowing down as I reached the slab of pink sandstone where people beach their small dinghies, I twisted my right foot free of the pedal cleat, swung my leg over the frame, squeezed the rear brakes and stopped completely with my left foot still locked in. I remembered the first time I tried that maneuver, half-way to Church Point on my first day in Nova Scotia. The bike had flown in one direction, my body in another, and my foot kept us firmly attached.

This will keep you humble, I remembered thinking, wiping blood away from three long scratches on my leg with my emergency towel.

In mid-August, the open ocean facing Falmouth-Foreside was filled with sailboats of all shapes and sizes. Above the small craft, a few two-masted boats rose high and noble. I thought of the boats I had gazed at from the outdoor café in Lunenburg, feeling calm and rested with Carroll. I wondered if he were back in Nova Scotia again this summer. Then I realized how much I wanted to be there, maybe biking through Cape Breton to catch the ferry for Argentia in Newfoundland. But I was content with my short ride from Munjoy Hill to Falmouth-Foreside under a cloudless sky. I sat on a bench at the end of the pier, drinking my Gatorade. A short distance away, on the longer and wider pier belonging to Portland Yacht Club, some type of party was starting. Waiters were carrying out tables covered with white tablecloths, wheeling trollies filled with silver dishes.

"Hey, biker!"

I looked up at the sound. Two middle-aged men were walking down the pier toward me. One of them carried a small red cooler.

"Where'd you come from?" one of them asked. He put a booted foot up on the bench next to me.

Just from Portland, I told him. Just out for a short ride.

The other one sat down next to me, took the lid off the cooler.

"Wanna beer?" he asked. "We're waiting for our wives to come in with the boat."

"They'll be late," the first man commented, shading his eyes with one hand and peering out to sea. "Always are."

I said thanks, took a beer. The wives turned out to be very late. The sun was low in a red-barred sky before I finished my second beer, said good-bye, and got back on my bike.

A Map

T for a Fictional World

ide near full, sea black and green, sky like cold polished glass. Dying winter sun in a blue world left to darkness and to him. November in Maine another hard slap in the face. A dry graveled running path, five miles circling a shallow cove. The city's light corona flew with his strides. On one side, the path edged wealthy suburbs; the other, it flowed over two highway bridges. Before his first night run, his long lozenge calf muscles, distance muscles, had pounded thousands of daylight miles. Dodging walkers and children, vaulting tethers of panting dogs, he fought the heat, learned to crave it as purgation. He ran away hours, days, weeks, denying new symbols of increasing age, searching for freedom from his job, from himself. Pushing past 6.5 miles per hour, past 8.0, even 9.0, he sometimes circled the cove three times, an even fifteen miles.

Schedule disrupted one day, he ran after dark. Free from children and dogs, he found new velocity. Down a long straight stretch he flew, the chamber of visible space around him just a few paces long, a flowing, dark womb. As he rounded one sharp curve, an arc of water swept out to meet him, high tide slapping at the timbered bank ten feet below. Another half-mile, a sprint over the first bridge, then a forward lean for the steep upgrade to the second. A full quarter-mile on concrete hanging in space, the void on his left a hand's breadth away. On his right, a few feet away, twin light circles roared by him, massive trucks indifferent to his naked exposure between two land points. Protected from those engines by only a low guardrail, he shot through that dark corridor at top speed.

A semi, a compact, a pick-up truck, a drunken teenager driving eighty miles per hour. Any of them could blast through the fence like a mallet through paper. Light-blinded, he would crash, slammed by modern technologies of death. His head cleanly severed, it would swirl into space, curve over the bay, hit the black, frigid water with a dead thud. What damnation might fire along the broken synaptic avenues, what lingering ignitions of electro-chemistry would spark? That steel coil carving into his heart, that snap-snap-snap of rib, femur, spine. Would he know? Would a silver strand conduct a message of destruction from his heart, smattered against concrete, to his brain as the head broke water below? Wide-eyed, drifting an unblinking path to the cove's muddy bottom, could it feel the bloody wreckage left behind?

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Dysfunctional family and the shores of Iolkos behind him, Jason sails eastward into the unknown world. Around Thessalonika's lumpy peninsula, past Thebes and Athens, he threads a needle through the treacherous channel between the Greek mainland and the large island-amoeba of Euboea. Standing on Lemnos gold and naked in the very tip of a shadow cast fifty miles across the Thracian Sea from Mount Athos, Jason shines as a messiah to Queen Hypsipyle. Two days before, the Queen and her women had slaughtered the King and all the island's men for having too much fun at an orgy on a nearby island populated entirely by women. When Jason comes ashore, purebred Greek (heterosexual) phallus has never been more valued. But Jason takes to the sea again, repudiating kingship, intercourse, and royal progeny. Past the bleak, harpy-ridden home of the prophet Phineus, Jason and chums luck their way through Hellespont, Propontos, and Bosphorus, finally taking their bearing along the southern rim of the Pontos Euxinus, the Tranquil Sea. They sail deeper into the far east, beyond the edges of the known world, as distant in space from their homes as they were in time from Hesiod's generations of gold, silver, and ash-spear heroes.

A talking ship charmed by Athena is no small gift, but even a goddess gets you only just so far when you're adrift in a black ocean vault, fifty hairy, odorous Minyans crowding your personal space in a craft whining like a gnat across nowhere's dark face. But something drives Jason on. In Aia, the most distant named place in the Hellenistic world, Jason thrashes the dragon-seed warriors, steals the worthless golden fleece and captures Medea, then flees her father's navy. Lurching drunk-like back across the northern Euxinus, fumbling through the Isles of Lovely Hair for egress to the Istros, the modern Danube, he shoots down the river like a foreign antibody in the bloodstream of future eastern Europe. Black Sea behind him, the virgin forests spreading in all directions from the river's banks make a canopy for a polymorphous continent of hell, an endless brachial topography webbing the unawakened consciousness of Romania, Bulgaria, Germany. Rivers that no longer flow, others that never existed.

Aghast at threading a path for Jason from roughly etched trading routes of the Black Sea clear across Europe to the Tyrhennian Sea, Apollonius of Rhodes, Jason's author, surrendered geographic authenticity altogether. Modern scholars say he may have thought the Rhine, Rhone, and Po were all the same, but his vision was even more inchoate. The prototype of Hellenism, successor to Zenodotus as curator of the Museum of Alexandria, rival to the great Callimachus, pet genius at the court of Ptolemy Philadelphus, Apollonius worshipped the Greek past as the Neoplatonists worshipped God's concentric spheres. In Apollonius's time, well over two millennia ago, no Greek had seen most of the known world, but a vast literary antiquity already lay in the past. Apollonius trembled at the thought of losing the legacy of Troy, of forgetting the agonies of the Mycenae. Infused with the Ptolemaic obsessive-compulsive disorder for flawless administrative records, Apollonius's reverence for the past materialized into an endless accumulation of facts. Today, an army of scholars with computers could not produce the catalogue he wrote by hand with reeds, the lost precursor to Callimachus's Pinakes, The Lists). A library's worth of descriptive lists of literary works already ancient in his day: Greek dramas, epics, chronicles, lyric poems, genres and styles with no extant examples. He recorded their titles, lengthy quotations, made querulous notes on authorship and performances. Toiling in his dark museum office, Apollonius preserved the titles of hundreds of Greek tragedies and comedies no one will ever

read or perform again. Confused memories of vivid dreams, the literature and knowledge lost forever glimmers faintly in his catalogues.

But what compelled a champion philologist to inscribe Jason's chaotic voyage into the literary record of his day? Profoundly challenged in creativity, why did he commit himself to imagining for Jason a circuit leading back to Greece? Jason navigated by stars while the other heroes slept. Apollonius, while Alexandria slept, arranged the stars.

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Yellow corona above the cityline ebbing to an airbrushed satin blue, like China's delicate ancient glasswork. Higher still, the deep blue of night ruled over the great sky dome, the cold as vivid as a single musical note ringing in the night, as clean as a long vowel sound from an extinct language. Three miles covered, the freezing air a red frisson against his sweat-sheathed skin, the sound, the cold, the color created a distance from other people sufficient to make him feel connected with danger, to ancient voyages through unexplored seas. Already he was old enough for that cardiac donkey kick to his chest. Youth's warrantee on his working parts had long expired. He knew of people only slightly older than he who already had felt the stab. Funny that humiliation was always the first sensation. Ignoring angina, they would excuse themselves politely from meetings, then stagger to their offices and shut the doors, slump into leather desk chairs and death. Driving themselves to hospitals rather than calling for help, they crashed into utility poles. What secret did they think their attacks betrayed? That they smoked three packs a day? That they never exercised? That fucking their third wives was too much for them? None of that applied to him; still, he suddenly knew that he would rather become a corpse hidden behind office doors than be caught aghast in mid-infarction by solicitous strangers, even by friends. Looking up, he saw the chrome and plastic hall of an office building. Pinstriped bodies, thick in the waist, were strewn down the hallways. Slowly the scene revolved above him, becoming panoramic. He saw final grimaces of fear, strange smug smiles, an ocean of laptops and briefcases and mobile phones scattered around the bodies like the flotsam shipwreck survivors might clutch.

Short- circuited ticker fantasies aside, those trees, close now on his left, could hide someone. A single lurking man might take one quiet step into his path as he barreled down the incline. Admiring the timing, he would impale himself on a knife pointed forward. Sternum shattered, the knife's steel point driven deep into his chest. Every radiant sensation of night-running would flow through that puncture into flesh and lung. He felt smooth steel sliding through the new red-walled crevice in his body. If the stab were hard and true, he would not even make it off the running path. Reeling to face the water, frigid air suddenly warm, blue night above him closer, hot white stars dancing. One wet, slippery hand clutched to his wound, he might step down the slope toward the cove's frozen edge. Beyond the water, the bracelet of city light begins revolving, gaining speed, like the candles on a turning birthday cake. Perhaps he would wonder if his death wish were stronger than those of other men after all.

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Was the world a globe to Ap oll on i us of Rhodes?

Geographers before him thought so, but the prevailing belief in Alexandria through the Hellenistic Era is ambiguous. Even if he did not, he must have sensed that more of the world remained to be found than the regions familiarized by the ancients. When he decided to revive the epic form, did he anticipate the ignorance he would confront once Jason fled the Black Sea? From an epic filled with the supernatural—clashing rocks, giants, epiphanies of Apollo—presented as facts, no reader expects an irruption of the surreal. But it happens. Somewhere on the shores of western north Africa, the Greek heroes, helpless, dying of thirst, now minus Herakles, maddened several landfalls before by the loss of his gay true love, and stuck with the increasingly creepy Medea and her womenfolk, disperse in the hazy heat, separate and stagger across the dunes of modern—Tunisia? Morocco? Libya? Some solitary, some in knots of two or three, they collapse in the dust, lamenting that despite their bravery they must die from sheer lack of knowledge. Burned bright red, sand-whipped, the brave men of Iolkos and the nameless girls from the Aia abandon themselves to despair.

Perhaps the scene's weirdness reflects what Apollonius only dimly sensed. Someday, his landscapes, the giant trees and living whirlpools through which he carefully steered his Argonauts, would all be replaced. Imagination would yield to truth. In the voyagers' dolor on the coast of Africa, perhaps Apollonius expressed a future in which the island-speckled Mediterranean would be the world's epicenter of learning no longer. Some writers would revel in their own glorious ignorance of distant lands. Excavating ocean beds, laying river channels, theorizing forests: these are literary chores that seduce the modern imagination. But no one as intoxicated with fact-accumulation as Apollonius, no one as reverential of the past, could be entranced by the idea of fictionalizing a world. The future might change the unclaimed world, but not for his age. The idea that an obscure sphere or vast plain might reach beyond his culture's beacon of light became a trope for Apollonius, a figure for enemies seen and unseen, for the exotic itself. Because the world was too vast, so uncharted, he made his heroes and their women stagger through the sand to find their own private places for dying. Lucky for them that they find another trace of Herakles's lovesick rampage that leads them—as they carry their ship, no less—to a lake that never existed.

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A set of chin-up bars and three wood slant boards were his cue for the final sprint. A broad intersection of city streets glimpsed past him on his right. Three streetlights cast a thick, frozen glow. The path curved left, taking him out into the cove. When he reached the bend's furthest point, the world was dark again, choppy water close on three sides. But ahead, in the parking lot, the end of another run, the start of an ordinary, solitary evening. What did people do who did not run at night? Nightclubbing with friends, reading in recliners, screwing with strangers and spouses. He knew what his friends—half-friends, all of them—would say about his addiction. Adolescent, self-deceiving, unhealthy. So he kept his secret from them, but only partly to thwart their criticism. He needed a link to the risks of dark, uncertain lands, to ancient lives spent in peril, to solitary achievement, to

hapless heroes in magical ships—even if it only took the degraded form of running at high speeds in frigid weather. Keeping the chance of death in the middle distance was enough, almost, to continue plodding through life's banalities. If he ran hard enough, the endorphin rush when he stopped was like a great wave breaking over a ship's prow, charging into every blood-swollen leg muscle. But that was only chemistry. The final exhilaration resulted from knowing that his heart still beat in his chest, that none of the night's pervasive perils had cut him down.

On one side, the dark path behind him. Far away, green and yellow bridge lights. From this distance, they reflected in the water as though on a sheet of brushed copper. Above the water, a patina of smoky air, languid and pale. He walked about in a circle, flexing his calf muscles, hoping some idea would take form. But running inspired his body, not his mind. Not the part of his mind, at least, that spent long night hours chasing plots and characters, decimating word troops, slaying adverbs. Poets translate sensual delight directly into words, but not fiction writers. Not writers like him who see themselves as stone cutters, masons with rugged Anglo-Saxon compounds. He was more likely to get an idea from a sentence overheard in the grocery store than from sensory saturation. Tonight's only idea was some vague notion about redressing the story of Jason and Medea. Far less than an idea, he admitted. But he might write it down, anyway.

Twisting his shoulders, jumping up and down in place, he stalls for a last look at the cove. That hard-won peace ebbing through his flesh. That brightening of perception. Thin night air cloaking his body like a neural net, junctions snapping into cold fire as he stares, reflecting. He surveys the water, trees, and light-pooled parking lot, his mind acute with all the hostile chances of the night.

The Punishment for Felonies in Belize

His 7 AM flight from Boston had been canceled. *More abandoned than canceled,* he thought, sprinting at top speed through Miami International Airport. Whenever he eased the tension in his arm, a small suitcase thumped against his hip. He glanced at the long vein running down the center of his upper arm. Bulging and reddened, the bicep strained against the sleeve of his T-shirt. *Not bad*, he thought. *Never too rushed to be vain!* He remembered the sick feeling in his stomach when the co-pilot of his doomed flight had made the first announcement. After a half-hour had passed, most of the passengers had deplaned, choosing to wait for further news in the concourse. Fuming, Randall remained in his seat, trying to read the *Boston Globe*. Some passengers strolled the aisles, while others took down their carry-on luggage and rearranged the contents. *Does anyone but me even pretend to notice size restrictions anymore*? Randall wondered, noticing suitcases and backpacks the size of steamer trunks.

After a second interval, another airline employee joined the plane's crew. Heavy but trim, the woman's blonde hair fell smoothly to the shoulders, curving inward at the bottom toward the neck. A dark suit with a gold pin denoted status higher than that of an ordinary flight attendant. Her function became apparent not long after he realized that she had no hard information to dispense. She chatted with passengers still attached glumly to their assigned seats. She laughed in the galley with the attendants. She kept up morale. *A professional soother*, Randall thought.

As Randall observed her at work, he thought of Margey. He felt certain that by this time, while he sat miserable and stalled on a tarmac, Margey was safely soaring from Chicago to Miami. Margey thrived on blind luck. Probably her plane from O'Hare had been delayed by mere minutes—just long enough for her to arrive late and hustle aboard. Margey trusted planes and trains to depart behind schedule. Whenever he travelled with her, it seemed as though they were linked together by an electromagnetism of good and bad fortune, he at the negative pole and Margey at the positive. It never occurred to her that she was sucking up an unfair share of the world's limited supply of good luck.

When the soother reached him, he had his story prepared. His friend would be looking for him, he explained. His flight from Miami was the last one of the day for Belize City. If Margey went from Belize City to the islands without him, he would have no way of knowing where to look for her. The soother listened to his

story closely, agreeing that flying to and from Belize was problematical. Randall listened to her bland consolations with genuine interest, thinking of smart, efficient blondes in Hitchcock movies. Tippi Hedren and Eva Marie Saint. If the soother were his travelling companion, she would be an invisible force field repelling bolts of bad luck. When he told her he might be able to catch a flight from Miami to Belize on Take-a-Chance-Airlines, she raised her eyebrows.

"'Take-a-Chance'—?" Putting one hand to a string of small pearls.

"You know, 'TACA.' 'Take-a-Chance Airlines.' Flies between Miami and Belize and Guatemala and the Yucatan. It's the only company other than yours that flies to Belize from the U.S. Someone told me all you insiders call it 'Take-a-Chance Airlines.'" The final comment was a lie; he had made up the nickname beforehand.

She leaned her head to one side, the hair curve slipping across her shoulder. "No comment!" she laughed musically. "No comment at all!"

I want this woman with me, Randall thought. *Margey never appreciates my wit.*

Flushed and sweating, his right arm almost numb, he bore down on the TACA boarding gate right at the minute that the plane was scheduled to take off. Sliding to a stop, he thrust the ticket forward, then listened as an agent explained to him that he could not enter because the plane carried only sufficient food for the passengers already aboard. The novelty of this latest impediment did not escape his admiration. Catching his breath, he wiped sweat from his brow, then shook the drops from his fingertips with a neat wrist snap.

"Gentlemen," he saluted them, "this morning I awoke at 4 AM in Bangor, a city just south of the North Pole. I have sprinted through two airports, this miserable suitcase swinging from the end of my arm like a leaden semaphore card. Regard that bicep, please. My shins feel like cracked cedar shingles. I ate mightily on my flight here, for which I ran through two terminals in Boston. I therefore shall consume nothing on your aircraft. Usher me to your nearest seat."

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The airport in Belize City made him think of bus stations in old movies. The doors to the restrooms were of scarred wood. Benches that belonged in city parks sprawled across the small waiting area. He discovered Margey talking to a travel agent. Dressed in canvas shorts and a black blouse, her hair long and thick, as she always wore it. As he came up beside her, she turned her head, said hello as though he had been there all along, then continued talking with the young man behind the desk. He put one arm around her shoulders and bent his head into her brown hair.

"Good to see you, too, Margey dear," he said.

On their Tropic Air flight out to San Juan, the largest of the Belizean cayes, he asked her if she had tried, when she arrived in Miami, to find out why he was not there. "I meant to go down to the ticket counter and ask someone about your flight," she said, "but my mother would have killed me if I left the country again without calling her, and when I was done talking to her it was almost time to board my plane. I figured that whatever had happened to you, I should keep heading for Belize."

"What if my car had been hit by a big moose in Maine?" he asked. She laughed, but he tried to sound earnest. "I'm serious," he said. "Those beasts are absolutely suicidal this winter."

“Oh, come on,” she chided. “I knew it was just a late flight or something. You always show up.”

“But what if I hadn’t made it to Belize today?” he continued. “Would you have still gone to the cayes without me? How would I have found you there? We only just made our hotel reservations now.”

“Oh, we would have hooked up,” she answered. “I don’t think there’s much to the place.” She looked out the window just as the plane dipped sharply. The ruffled sheet of aquamarine sea seemed only inches away. “I don’t really like small planes, you know.” She shifted away from the window a few inches—closer to him, but not so close that their bodies touched. “Not since that nightmare plane ride in Nepal.”

Feeling thwarted, he dropped the subject. “Did you bring any shampoo?” he asked, thinking of essential items in the luggage that he hoped was following him from Boston to Belize.

“No,” she answered. “Actually, I didn’t bring anything I thought I could borrow from you, since I had to drag so much stuff with me for my two weeks in Guatemala after you leave.”

He stretched his legs out into the aisle, laughing. “If that includes money, you better hope my suitcase finds me. Because that’s where all my travelers cheques are.”

Margey proved to be right: there wasn’t much to San Juan. Through the section of the island populated by tourists ran a narrow dirt road, dissolving into jungle at one end. In the other direction lay the island’s expensive hotels, their stucco facades facing the ocean across outdoor restaurants and neat rows of chaise lounges. But Randall and Margey stayed at Ruby’s Ocean Breeze Hotel, a cheap place with no hot water most of the day. They snorkeled near the coral reef, went scuba diving, and Randall took wind-sailing lessons while Margey lay in the sun. In the long afternoons, they would drift back to Ruby’s, buy bottles of Belizean beer at a tiny dirt-floored store, then stroll down the road, drinking. One afternoon Ruby herself, a short, heavy woman, came running toward them. Raised high in both her hands, like a treasure, was Randall’s missing suitcase.

“They just brought it from the airport,” she gasped. “I thought you might need something from it, so I’m bringing it you right now.” She dropped the suitcase in the dirt. Randall and Margey held her up while she caught her breath, all laughing.

One afternoon after a dive, they sat on a palm-thatched patio eating citrus and conch cocktails. Margey talked about her job and Randall reminisced about hiking the Appalachian trail with her a year ago. He avoided referring to two days when he carried Margey’s pack on top of his own because she had sunburned her back. Then Margey described her first date with a man in Chicago.

“What timing,” Randall said. “Did you tell him you were going to Belize with a male friend?”

“Sure,” she answered. “I told him we’ve been friends since grad school. That you’re harmless.” Her last word made him set down his spoon abruptly and look away. The sun was still high in the sky, the vast sea a smooth glass beyond low waves breaking on the sand.

“You make me sound like an old dog, Margey.” He kept his voice low, but his face suddenly was burning in the hard sunlight.

“Oh, come on.” She poked his arm with her fork. “You know what I meant.”

He knew he should change the subject, how she would react if he continued, but he spoke quickly.

"When I found you in the airport on the mainland, you barely noticed I was there. You kept talking with that travel agent for another five minutes before you even looked at me."

"Oh blast it," she muttered, looking down at her food. "You always do this at least once. Did you want me to hurl myself into your arms?"

Randall suddenly rose to his feet. For a moment, the flimsy plastic chair stuck to his bare legs, then it fell onto the planks of wood. They both stared down at it until the clattering stopped. When they faced each other again, her expression seemed defiant, impatient for his criticism. "As though that's the only alternative to taking me for granted," he whispered, trying to keep his voice calm. He wished he had said nothing, but more words trembled out of his mouth. "What a cheap answer that was, Margey. *You* always do *that.*" Then he stalked away, shaking all over. He paused where the patio ended, hoping she might call after him, but he knew she would not. Walking away toward the surf, he stole a look back. She was finishing her cocktail, talking to a waiter as he righted the chair. Randall heard him laugh in response to something Margey said.

That night he avoided her. Before she returned to their room, he showered and left again, eating dinner alone at a restaurant and disco that she had found unappealing. He had two drinks during his meal, then several more when he began talking with a group of commercial travel agents from Nashville. Soon he was dancing with one of the agents, a woman who spoke in a drawl so long that he lost track of her sentences before they ended. The dance floor was open to the night air, but, as the bar filled, the coolness of sea breezes was overpowered by a sweaty smell. Even in a muscle shirt and gym shorts, Randall felt oily, flushed. He drank as he danced, sloshing a gin and tonic on his feet. He tried to tell his partner that he felt out of place in the Caribbean, that he usually avoided expensive playgrounds for white American tourists. But she only smiled back at him, not hearing his words. When a sentimental ballad began to play, she came closer, swaying against him until he put his arms around her. She asked him if he had come to Belize all by himself.

"I'm with Margey, so yeah," he answered, shouting above the music.

"Who's Margey?" she asked, sliding one hand up and down his back.

"This platonic friend who thinks I was gelded after she dumped me eleven years ago. Since then, I've been getting her ass out of scrapes all over the states and Europe. She's a disaster-magnet, but she's a doctor, and she's traveled more than I have, so she thinks she knows more about the world than I do."

"And what are you?" Her voice was high and sweet. She slipped one hand through the armhole of his loose shirt and pressed it against his side.

"A doctor." He laughed in a big spurt, spilling more of his drink. An REM song began blaring through the room and the dance floor suddenly shook with pounding feet. "I'm a real doctor, actually," he yelled. "A Ph.D. Margey's an organ technician. She does angioplasty. Would you want a balloon in your aorta? The treatment's only good for a few years, anyhow, then the balloon people fall over dead like redwoods. I write articles. The titles alone would curl your hair. Don't ask."

Her face remained blank through his banter. "What are you doing with this Margey person if she's so bad?" she finally asked. "I'd say you ought to find someone who appreciates you."

"You are *so* right, ma'am," he answered in a solemn drawl. "Look at that bicep. Enough to make anyone feel safe, right?" He flexed his right arm for her. "You think Margey would ever say it looks nice? Not my Margey. I could paint my face purple and she wouldn't notice."

She opened her mouth to answer, but he raised his arm, cuing her to spin. Then he dropped her hand and turned away, still dancing. Suddenly he thought of Margey sleeping alone in their room. Why could he not accept her as she was? Even though she never showed him any appreciation or affection, he knew she honestly tolerated the fussy habits he had developed through years of living alone. His own acceptance of her weaknesses, he admitted, was partly faked. He tried to conceal his frequent annoyance with jokes, had even trained himself to avoid making accidental references to her perpetual disorganization. The previous summer, he had repressed so much discontent that he finished a trip with a case of indigestion that lasted weeks into the fall semester.

They had toured the west coast of Ireland together. On their third day, they left Galway in a rented car, the bicycles they had brought with them from the states strapped to a carrier. A few miles after it was too late to turn back, she found that her change purse was missing. The cash only amounted to a few punts and some change, but the purse contained her keys to a flat in Paris.

"Damn, damn, damn," she yelled. She was on her knees in the passenger seat of the tiny Uno, tossing around bags in the back seat.

"Please turn around and put your harness back on, Margey," he said, surveying the road as though it were a minefield. "I haven't driven on the wrong side of the road in a long time. We can search your bags when we stop."

"I already lost one set of keys to Danielle's apartment before I took the ferry here from France," she told him, turning around and flopping into her seat, throwing back her hair. "It costs a fortune to have keys made in Paris, you know. Danielle may not be there when I get back, in which case I won't have a place to stay. And if she *is* there, she'll think I'm a total scatterbrain."

He allowed the reverberations of her last word to subside before he spoke again. "As Dan Rather used to say before CBS told him to cut the crap, Margey: 'Courage.'" She stared through the windscreen, ignoring him. "We know the only two places in Galway where you could have left the purse, right? If we don't find it when we get back, maybe you can call Danielle and arrange something."

But she refused to be comforted. "Look at those sheep sleeping right in the road," he said, nudging her with his elbow. "Those fluorescent stripes make them look like harper seals saved by Greenpeace people. Move, you sheep," he hollered out the window. "American at the wheel!"

Back in Galway three days later, they drove straight to the shop where they had rented the bicycle carrier. When they failed to find the purse, Margey sighed deeply and walked out the door.

"The purse will be at the airport," he consoled her. "I saw it in a dream last night, right after I heard the banshee wailing. Courage."

Margey went off to do some laundry for their long bike trip to Clifden the next day. Left alone, Randall wrestled his bicycle into the car, then drove fifteen miles to the Galway airport. After parking the car and leaving the keys in a drop box, he began searching for the purse. The small terminal was deserted, the counters and stalls all closed and empty. But at a bar in the far corner two older men were drinking beer and smoking pipes. Feeling self-conscious in his tight biking tunic and a blue bandanna, Randall squelched his aversion to asking

strangers for directions or help. But when he asked the men about a lost and found, they only turned and stared at him, silent, their faces wrinkled and red like two old fists.

When he finally left the airport an hour later, he discovered that his front tire was flat as paper. He had brought extra tubes and a flexible spare tire to Ireland, but they were packed in the gear already dropped off at their B and B. He pumped up the tire, but the pressure held for less than a kilometer. Dusk gathered and the drizzle grew to a steady rain as he dogged along, stopping every few minutes to inflate the tire again. Once he stopped to get his windbreaker out of his knapsack, but then remembered that Margey was wearing it. Just before full dark, his arms and face scarlet from the cold, he found a bike shop on the outskirts of Galway.

A young mechanic eyed the tire gravely, an unlit cigarette hanging from his lips. “Roikt wit dorns,” he finally announced.

“Exactly,” Randall answered, his mind racing through possible translations. When he finally hit on ‘raked with thorns,’ the flat tire suddenly made perfect sense. “You’re absolutely right,” he told the boy. “We had our bikes on the back of a car, and one night my friend backed the car into a hedge.”

They had been near Sligo, searching for a farmhouse B and B on an unpaved lane. When they agreed they were lost, Margey stopped to turn the car around. As he was urging her to be careful, both rear tires slipped into a gully. After a few tense words, he had gone groping into the black night, stepping blindly into the ditch and landing on his knees in icy water. Working by touch, he braced both his legs against a tree, put his back against the car, and began heaving. Between grunts, he yelled at Margey not to let the car roll backward. He imagined both his legs with compound fractures, hoping she was better at setting splints than making three-point turns. Getting away with tires only roikt wit dorns was probably lucky.

A red-haired teenager with a dry, efficient manner, the mechanic handed Randall an old sweater to wear, then locked up the shop. They worked together on the bike, first hunting up a German-made tube that would fit Randall’s bike, then ripping thorns from the tire with pliers. When Randall finally reached city centre over an hour later, he found a note from Margey tacked on a bulletin board in the launderette. She had gone shopping. The note told him to meet her at a pub down the road. At the bottom of the note, she had added “Bring the garbage bag with the clean clothes under the counter.”

“Bloody hell,” he bellowed, striding up to her table and throwing down the bag. “Unhand that Guinness, wench! I’m soaked, filthy, greasy, tired—”

“Any luck with the change purse?” she asked, sliding her beer across the table toward him.

He began to reach into a pocket for the purse, but the guarded optimism in her face abruptly changed his mind. “Affable chaps at the bar in the airport said ‘no’ when I asked them if they knew of a lost and found—I mean the place for ‘left luggage.’” He finished off her beer. “Get me another!” he barked, banging the glass down. “‘No’ is *all* they said. Fortunately, a cleaning woman appeared who was more articulate. We looked behind counters, opened cabinets, hustled and bustled and searched the whole damn place. The catatonic men kept staring at me, whispering to each other. The woman and I found no change purse.”

She dropped her head in her hands, shaking her long hair. “Why do I keep losing things?” she moaned.

“A question often asked, Margey, but courage. The only other person I could find was a mechanic working on a helicopter on the landing field. It seemed ridiculous to ask him for help, but I figured I had already lost every ounce of self-respect, so what did I have to lose? I stamped across the tarmac with iron resolve, yelling ‘Hey, you’!” I didn’t want him to ignore me the way the men at the bar had done, you see.”

“And?” She looked up, all of her face but the eyes covered by her hands.

“Your eerie good luck has held true. The purse was in a hangar, for unknown reasons. Keys and even money intact.” He tossed the black bag on the table. Her face lit up as though it were the apple thrown by Discordia before the three vain goddesses. Which one would Margey be, he wondered? Certainly not Aphrodite. And Hera seemed too cold and willful even for Margey. Ah, he thought. Athena. Skillful, unemotional. Wise with a man’s knowledge. Of course.

“Are the keys really there?” she cried, reaching for the purse.

“Of course,” he answered, trying to sound indignant. He was shivering all over with cold and excitement, the sudden pulse of alcohol through his veins. Something about her happiness made him feel weak. “You know I return with my sword or on it.”

In the bathroom, he cleaned up and changed into jeans and a sweater that Margey had washed for him. After more beer and a hot dinner, he asked her the question he thought was too obvious to remain unspoken. “Didn’t you wonder where the hell I was all that time, Margey? When I caught up with you here, you acted as though I were right on time.”

She shrugged, content and slightly drunk, holding the purse. “Figured you stopped to look at something,” she answered. “What did happen, anyway?”

Still thinking of Margey’s befuddled expression the previous summer, he felt himself grabbed by the shoulder, then spinning. With a smile, his dancing partner pulled him around to face her, wrapping her fingers firmly around the muscle he had displayed. She moved closer, making him put his arms around her waist. As he looked into her bright eyes, the music died and the floor stopped shaking. With a slow jolt, the swaying world righted itself into hard angles and smooth planes. He looked at the gin and tonic in his hand, knowing that if he ordered another drink, he would not stop until his words were slurred, until he was melancholy and sullen. He looked at the woman as though she were behind glass, wondering if he could spend the night with her. But what would he say to Margey? He saw himself, fresh from having sex with a stranger, encountering her in the morning. Suddenly, he realized that if he went to this woman’s room, he would betray some quality in his friendship with Margey. He was too drunk to know what this quality might be, but he felt a need to protect it.

He said good-bye to the woman as neatly as possible, trying not to sound abrupt, then left the bar. Wanting to strip the bar’s music and smoke from his skin, he jerked off his shirt, shivering as the night air closed around him like the leaf of a jungle plant curling around an insect. He walked with his face turned up, inhaling the cool rhythm of the ocean breezes. Far above him, palm trees hurled their heads back and forth. The black ocean on his right was watchful, impassive, showered with light from a bone-white moon. When he reached Ruby’s, he fell asleep in a chaise lounge on the beach, the ocean pounding toward him like black stallions in his dreams.

The next morning, he found Margey eating breakfast at the restaurant next to Ruby's. "Someone looks green under his tan and all those new muscles," she said. "Too much medicine last night?"

He squeezed her shoulder as he passed behind her chair. "I didn't really drink that much, but it hit me hard. Must be all the pressure changes from diving so much. Any coffee?" He had showered quickly when he woke up and found their room empty, but he was still unshaved, hands shaky.

"I saw you on the beach when I came over here. Why didn't you come back to the room?" She watched him drink two full glasses of water. "It's too cold here at night to sleep on the beach."

"Hope there's no exotic amoebae in there," he said, setting down the water and switching to coffee. "I wasn't moving too steadily last night, Margey dear, and I didn't want to wake you up. Seemed like the least I could do after causing an argument and ruining our day."

"I was awake. And don't be so quick to apologize, Randall. You had a point."

"I did?" He looked up from the menu. She was observing him silently, her expression unreadable. He wanted her to say more, perhaps to admit that he had good reasons to feel neglected by her. But a sudden blast from a car horn made them both jump. Out in the street, a flatbed truck was rolling down the road, loaded with children from the island's elementary school. Sitting on the dusty boards, young girls were dressed in stiff cotton dresses of white and tangerine and blue. Bunny ears cut from construction paper swayed above their heads, a blur of lemon color. The children waved their arms and shouted, blowing on whistles and throwing confetti in the air.

"Easter!" Margey and Randall exclaimed to each other. "Come on," Margey said, pulling at his arm, "they want to make a parade."

But Randall hung back, still wanting to talk. Before he ran after her, he watched Margey talking with the children. One of them gave her a pair of ears to wear, while another reached out her arms. Margey plucked her off the truck, swinging her high in the air, both of them laughing. Randall watched Margey's long, brown arms, her breasts lifted upward, tight against a yellow silk shirt.

After the parade, they returned with the children to their school, where a teacher asked them to talk to her students about life in America. Later, Margey sat on the beach writing postcards while Randall took his final wind-surfing lesson. He tacked back and forth in long graceful sweeps, shifting his weight at just the right moments, keeping his back arched and tense. As his muscles hardened, he felt his lingering hangover break into a crystal lucidity. He felt powerful, attractive. He called out for Margey to watch him when he dipped close to shore, but she never looked up from her work.

When his lesson ended, they went to their room and began packing. "Tell me again why we're going to Caye Caulker," Randall said. "Is it because you want to smoke dope with all those Rastafarians?"

"Damn and double damn," Margey muttered behind him. "I can't find *La Ruta Maya.*"

Not again, he thought. He turned to look at her side of the room. Clothing and books were strewn about, as they had been since their first day. "Is this book terribly important?" he asked, knowing that it would be.

"It has a good section on Guatemala," she answered. "And I wrote something in the margin that I absolutely need, the phone number of some people

who might put me up for a few days until I get settled." Sitting on the floor, she frowned viciously at the piles of debris around her. "I hate losing things!"

Randall sighed and sat down on his bed. He felt well-rehearsed for this moment. "Calm down," he said. "Let's try to figure out the last time you saw the book."

He awoke well before dawn the next morning, a half-moon washing the room with pale, eerie light. Feeling like a spirit, he slipped from between the sheets. He reached under his bed for a sweater and a flashlight, then crossed the room and opened the door noiselessly. In her own bed, Margey was sleeping easily, her breathing deep and even. She always wore a T-shirt and gym shorts to bed when they shared a room, an androgynous uniform identical to his. But the shirt had twisted to expose a narrow strip of her bare stomach above the edge of the bed sheet. He stared at the spot until he saw the rhythm of her breathing, then he looked at her face. She was no longer the young woman he had met in his first class at graduate school, years before she switched to medicine. He saw nothing but smooth, healthy skin on her face, the familiar small mouth with twin shadows at the corners. But the face showed a maturity he had never noticed before. In the crepuscular light, her face seemed like a symbol of the changes they both had lived through since those days. And of the continuity that somehow kept them linked. When she moved slightly, he quickly left the room and shut the door. If she awoke and found him staring at her in the dark, he thought, she would never share a room with him again.

The island's landing strip was less than a mile away, but as he stumbled along the uneven dirt road, following his flashlight's narrow beam, the distance seemed endless. Why he was doing this? Margey, after all, had lost the damn book, not he. It was not his fault that the airport, where she might have left the book when they first arrived, would not be open until long after they left the island by boat at 6 AM. But when he thought of her arriving in Antigua all alone, without the contact number, he felt he must help her. She had travelled through much of the world without his protection—something she always reminded him of whenever he hinted that she might need him. But she was with him now, and he owed her the best he could manage, whether she wanted it or not, whether or not she would do the same for him. The forces that had shifted the quirky balance of power and responsibility in their friendship for so long had given him a role to play, a part to finish. *Or something like that*, he thought. Above him, the moon tinged black clouds with luminescent edges, then sank behind them into darkness. He walked faster.

The terminal building was little more than a shack made from corrugated metal sheets, sitting on the edge of a soccer field. He paused for a moment, listening, then clicked off his flashlight and trotted across the field. Darting glances from left to right, he felt himself assume the skulk of a thief. *She made me a criminal*, he thought, stifling a laugh. *Wonder what they do to you down here for this kind of stunt?* Then he began sliding along the building's back wall, searching for a window. When he found one slightly ajar, he saw himself entering easily and finishing this task without trouble. But the window was high enough so that pulling himself up to the sill while opening the window wider was tricky. Slowly, he hoisted himself off the ground, knocking the window farther open with his head. He dragged his upper body across the sill until he was balanced like a lever on the narrow ledge, his arms groping through a void, his legs waving in the air for balance. As he peered into the dark, the window suddenly fell down on his back.

He cursed and twisted to right and left, trying to raise the window high enough to get a hand beneath it. Then he felt something sharp rip through the skin of his right arm. The pain made him panicky. In three quick motions, he squeezed an elbow under the window, pushed up with all his strength, and blindly threw himself forward. *Not one of my better ideas*, he thought, sprawling headlong onto a row of molded plastic chairs. He lay there motionless, his heart pounding as he waited for the echoes of falling chairs to cease. When the heavy silence returned, he realized that he would never do anything so outlandish in the states. He was no better than a frat boy raising hell in Cancun, trusting to his identity as an American tourist, a white tourist, to protect him from serious trouble.

Only a few hours later, a red sun just lifting above the horizon, he and Margey were cutting through a calm sea in a power launch. They were groggy and hungry, but charged by the pure cool air burning away in streams of mist. “Oh, here,” he shouted at her over the motor’s roar. “Thought you might need this.” He pulled a book out of his knapsack and handed it to her. “Keep it safe, now.”

“*La Ruta Maya*!” she cried, taking the book from his hands. “How did you find it?” She riffled through the pages as though some of them might be gone.

“When have I failed you, Margey dear?” he asked, leaning back in his seat and propping up one foot on the side of the boat.

“Seriously,” she said, looking up from the book. “Was it at the airport after all? How did you get in when it was closed?” She looked at the bandage on his arm. At the center was a pale red smear. “Does this have something to do with that cut?”

“Look at this bicep,” he said, holding it up for her to see. “Think it will look sexy with a scar?”

She put the book in a canvas bag, then turned away from him to watch the boat’s green-white wake. After a moment, he asked her what was wrong. Didn’t she want to hear the whole story of how he had found the book? But she shook her head, keeping her back to him. Taking her long hair in both hands, she twisted it into a braid and let it fall onto her back.

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When he saw her walk through the door, he drew in his breath sharply. She stood in the dimly lit foyer, shaking snow from her hair and brushing it from her coat. People in dark clothes crossed his line of vision as he stared at her. One moment she was talking to the director, who took her coat. The next she was looking in a mirror, blowing her nose with a handkerchief, wiping melted snow from her eyelashes. Then she stood on the threshold to the central room, uncertain, her face in shadow.

“That’s my friend Margey,” he said to his sister. He tried to speak normally, but it was impossible not to drop his voice to hush.

“The woman you went to Ireland with? And Newfoundland and Belize?” Marlene turned around and took a long look. “I thought she’d be very pretty,” she said, nodding. “When did you tell her what happened?”

He shook his head. He had phoned Margey shortly before his brother Frank had fallen ill. A recorded message told him that her number was no longer in use. When he tried to leave his number with her paging service, he learned that her identification code was no longer valid. He slammed the receiver down, remembering two other times in their history when she had moved without telling

him. *Does she know you can get free postcards from the post office to send to your friends?* he wondered. He wrote her a letter that was returned with a yellow sticker on it saying 'Undeliverable as Addressed.' Two days later, Frank was taken to the hospital when he fell down at work, both his legs numb as rocks. Through the following weeks, the shifting diagnoses advanced by doctors had absorbed Randall's life.

"Bring her over here, Randall," Marlene said, giving him a slight push. "She must feel awkward."

He began to thread his way through the crowd, people smiling at him as he passed. A firm pressure on his arm, a hand lingering on his shoulder. "Your brother was a wonderful man," someone said. Randall nodded, but he kept his face blank. When he broke through the fringe and stepped into the empty space separating him from Margey, his heart was beating hard, his hands shaking. He stopped, confused by Margey's image. In his thoughts, she was always outdoors. Hiking, swimming, bicycling. T-shirts and shorts, jeans and backpacks, tennis racquets, ski equipment, rented cars. He remembered taking her picture one autumn day when they climbed Mount Katahdin. She was wearing canvas shorts and a plaid vest borrowed from him. Her brown hair, always unruly, was pulled back with a bandanna, but a cloudy fringe fell across her forehead. Behind her was a stand of pine trees, their bright green needles piercing dry red leaves blown against them by a howling wind.

In a grey skirt and a navy blue sweater, a delicate silver chain around her neck, she could not be the same person. Her disfamiliarity suddenly made him think of his brother at the other end of the room. Randall turned to look at the coffin on the raised dais. With the blink of a card-player's trick, Frank had become a stranger. Delusional, he would swoop from chaos onto startling ideas, jabbering until spit flew from his mouth, leaving Randall and Marlene miserable and embarrassed. Pretending patience, Randall would hold Frank's hands for hours, wishing he could run from the hospital and meet Margey somewhere far away, anywhere. Then Frank fell silent and never spoke again.

Randall took a step toward the coffin, but suddenly Margey was pulling him back. She embraced him quickly. He put his arm around her waist, surprised at how far he had to bend over to bring his face close to hers. "You would have liked Frank," he said. She held him close. "He was so capable, and strong. I called you, but I couldn't get through. And I wrote, but then I gave up. Everything happened so fast. His brain turned into boiled cabbage. No one this close to me has ever died before." He pulled back to look her in the face. "I thought we weren't friends like this, you know? I told myself you would call the next time you were ready for a trip. We'd be someplace in Scotland or Mexico and I'd get drunk while I told you about Frank."

She said how sorry she was, then led him through the archway into the foyer. In a small parlor with one lamp burning, she sat down on a sofa, then pulled him down beside her. He sat with his elbows on his knees, holding his head in his hands. Margey put an arm around his shoulders. He felt his back shaking under her touch, but could not stop it. As callers began to leave, the two sat talking. She explained her canceled numbers and address, then let him tell her about the bacterial infection that no drugs could reverse.

"We see it more and more," she said, holding his hand. "So many common bacteria have developed new resistance to antibiotics."

He straightened up on the loveseat, rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his hands and looking her in the face. “How did you hear about Frank?” he asked. “How did you find the funeral parlor?”

As she answered his questions, he wiped at his face with a handkerchief, interested in something other than Frank for the first time in days. “All those things you did just to come here?” he asked.

“It wasn’t especially hard, Randall.” Her face was grave. “You’ve been a good friend for a long time. Of course I came to see if I could help.”

He looked down at the floor, away from her. *Help*, he thought. *Nothing can help.* But then he remembered thinking, in the worst days of Frank’s dying, how wrong it seemed that Margey had never met his family. He suddenly wanted to introduce her to Marlene and his mother. And even show her Frank before the hours ended. At different times, they had all teased him that Margey did not really exist.

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After leaving Caye Caulker, they had traveled across Belize into Guatemala. Under a burning sun, they walked silent and awed through the stark, shadeless ruins of Ti-Kal. They slept that night under mosquito netting in a dank cabin without electricity, rising at dawn to wander through the park again. Monkeys swung through trees as keel-billed toucans cut flying orange streaks through the curls of humid mist. The jungle was green and dark, alive with shrill, exotic cries. They both wished they could stay longer, but the next day Randall would fly back to Maine, Margey to Antigua for two weeks of intensive Spanish instruction. They arrived back in Belize City exhausted from ten hours on an ancient American school bus, but after dinner they rallied their spirits and went to the Radisson Fort George for drinks. A safari-suited doorman, tall and black and glowing with good will, ushered them inside. They sat in a bar elegant with teak-framed mirrors reflecting the green plush of a dozen banquettes. As they drank champagne, Randall remarked that the bar seemed like a place where some smart, pretty actress with a low profile would suddenly walk in. Maybe Gillian Anderson. “It’s cosmopolitan, but off the beaten track,” he said. Margey asked if he wished Gillian Anderson were with him instead of her.

“Anderson or that doorman,” he answered. Then he removed a calculator and a notebook from his pocket, saying it was time to figure out which one of them owed the other money. He already knew that Margey owed him a couple hundred dollars and that he might not receive it for months. He didn’t care.

“Oh, not now,” Margey said, reaching over and closing the notebook. “Figure out the finances in Bangor and write to me. This is our last night together. I don’t even know when I’ll have a friend to talk to again, especially in English.”

All that day, a tropical storm had swept across the Greater Antilles and into Central America’s coastline. The sky above had blackened and sagged in heavy, rounded clouds. Before noon, furious rain pummeled the city’s flimsy wooden buildings. Streets flooded, the harbor closed, and the city’s long open sewer brimmed full and overflowed. Electricity failed in the early evening. The bar was lit only with candles and hurricane lamps. Randall and Margey rose from their seats to stand near the French doors leading to a patio bordering the harbor. Randall suddenly wanted to tell her how much he wished they were not parting, but he

held his silence. They stared into the glass, their reflections tinted green by the bar's low light, clear water sheeting down the glass.

"Thanks for the trip," she said, her voice just a whisper. "I'll miss you. Thanks for helping with things."

For a moment, her profile was sharp in the dark glass, then it was lost in streaming rain. Her expression, when the wavering rain and shadow allowed him to see it, was solemn. Struck by her stillness, he wanted to tell her that he would miss her, too. That she was a friend he loved whatever her terms, despite his discontents. But her few words had said more about her feelings for him than he had ever heard her say before. It seemed right for one trip to end with Margey having shown more emotion more than he.

At Ti-Kal, they had discovered they were victims of complementary phobias. Without fear, Randall charged up and down the treacherous center staircases of the pyramids. But he could stand at the top for only a moment before a strange fear of the vast, empty air surged through him, forcing him to descend. Margey, however, as though taunting his weakness, sat happily beneath the roof comb of Pyramid III, eating bananas and talking in French with another tourist for almost an hour. But she had tortured herself to the summit, clutching at handholds so tightly that she cut her hands. He reminded her of this as they stood by the French doors, told her it was funny the way he would already be charging down a pyramid, fleeing airy gulfs, while she still clawed her way up. She nodded with a slow hint of a smile into the liquid sheen, but she said nothing. They stood close together, his chest grazing her back. Beyond the glass, sleek yachts tossed in the raging sea, their tall white masts slanting against each other like crossed lances.

And Marion *Never Looked Lovelier*

is first advertisement ran in every newspaper published in the United States, from the Los Angeles *Times* to the *Far North Clarion* of Blaine, Maine (circulation nine). He spent millions more to make the announcement on every paper's second page. Editors hastily reshuffled lead stories on biological warfare in Cyprus and the execution of a celebrity who had murdered seven nuns. This lapse in journalistic ethics would have been fiercely denounced if even his most bitter opponents had not lost their energy for deploring his bizarre stunts. This included the entire citizenry of Canada, from which he was banned after attempting to bribe the people of Labrador into seceding from the nation and selling him their entire sub-province. His passion for fly-fishing was notorious.

Only from Incarnaction Pictures!!
Your favorite dead stars in all-new films!!

Dazed but enticed, Americans murmured the words to themselves, pondering the possible interpretations. What was Jimmy I. Rapar, the planet's first bona fide trillionaire, up to this time? Had he improved on film colorization? Had he devised some intricate new morphing process? Something way beyond putting holographs of dead singers into stage acts? More sophisticated and cynical readers suggested that Jimmy may have purchased every old film in existence, cut them up frame by frame, and reassembled them into new products. No one was sure this was technologically feasible, much less legal, but few doubted that Jimmy was capable of pawning off such cannibalizations as 'new' movies. Three years ago, he had provoked a disastrous naval mobilization by phoning the president, whom he despised, and convincing her that exiled dissidents from the Faroe Islands had gained control of Norway. More recently, he had caused an octogenarian Brazilian coffee tycoon to keel over at a masked ball in Monte Carlo. The man lay bleeding from his nose into a platter of braised asparagus, stone dead from terror. Standing at the top of the grand staircase was Jimmy, his face covered with a burlap bag. In one hand he held a whining chain saw. From the other, clutched by tangles of bloody hair, hung a severed human head. Jimmy laughed his way through the scandal, telling European reporters that old geezers with bad tickers should avoid riotous parties. (He himself was the world's sole owner and user of an artificial heart developed by his own medical technologies company.) The legal penalty for possessing stolen body parts in Monaco proved to be negligible.

Film purists shivered as they read their newspapers. What abomination of the classics, they wondered, might issue from Jimmy Rapar's brilliant but diseased imagination? Certain film archaeologists, however, felt guarded optimism. They pondered the endless list of legendary lost classics. Theda Bara's *Cleopatra*? The full version of Erich von Stroheim's *The Honeymoon*, shot in two-strip technicolor, its last print deliberately burned in Paris? The first British talkie, *The Black Waters*? Had Jimmy secretly spent billions searching museum attics and dank vaults hidden below Hollywood mansions for reels of disintegrating silver nitrate? No one could make a financial profit from such an enterprise, but perhaps Jimmy, nearing his 105th birthday, now wished to be immortalized in the history of high culture. And what did Jimmy care about money?

But from the great majority of readers, the advertisement evoked a less analytical response. As they fantasized about beloved dead stars in new narratives, they wondered, furtively, if the most tantalizing and bizarre interpretation of 'All-New Films' might be the true one. Could Jimmy—could even he be so smart, so rich, so daring—could Jimmy have discovered a magical or scientific formula for bringing the dead back to life? Workplaces emptied and churches filled. Alone with their gods, people prayed with an urgency certain to be heard in heaven. "Let Jimmy bring them back to life," they begged. "Do something exciting, you do-nothing deity!"

Eight months into the first year of the new millennium, people were still shellshocked from the pain of realizing that nothing extraordinary had happened when the three nines on their digital clocks had turned into zeroes. To even the most cynical and abstemious, New Year's Eve in 1999 had seemed magical, a bridge of golden light extending from the dog-dull late nineties into an age promising universal celebrity and a recrudescence of the high-rolling '80s. Celebrations endured for weeks and months. Entire cities were overwhelmed by endless street festivals. But it was not only those inclined to carousing who fell under the spell of the year 2000. As the debauches rocked on, predictions of impending paradise and perdition whipped the pious into a sober frenzy. From pulpit, mountain top, and barricaded compounds, orthodox clergy, tranquil New Age prophets, and cult leaders with bulging eyeballs issued promises and threats. As the days into the new millennium ticked away and the drunken hordes caught their fourth wind, the spiritual masses retained their faith that a glorious metamorphosis was near.

Sometime in March, the effects of alcohol, drugs, and piety reached an inevitable nadir. Thirsty and sick, the newly disaffected staggered forward. Those who had remained sober were no less spent, their hearts and minds vacuumed by spiritual disillusionment. Most Americans spent the first months of 2000 BCE denying that life in the new millennium was not a whit less tedious than before. But in the first wet weeks of spring, they faced each other blankly, admitting that the only noteworthy occurrence of the new era was the spectacle they had made of themselves. As the year slogged along, the shame of their earlier folly burned in their minds. When winter arrived, the advent of 2001 filled them with repressed rage bordering on delusional psychosis. Sober, straight, and dried out from fantasies of the Millennial City, they braced themselves for the monotony of a century that loomed ahead like several billion tons of plankton left to rot in the slimy bed of a drained ocean. With less than three months to go before New Year's Eve, Jimmy Rapar's headline finally roused them from the lethargy that the American Psychiatric Academy predicted might destroy western civilization.

Desperate for details, they pored over the advertisement's fine print with sweaty hands and dry lips. But they found nothing to explain Jimmy's enigmatic promise.

Dancing with glee through his palace outside Chicago, Jimmy let the whole world stew in its own sauce of despairing hope. His skeletal toes pattered joyously across the Venetian marble floors, skinny hairless legs white as fish bones beneath the hem of a chinchilla bathrobe he had won in a poker game from the Queen of the Netherlands. Reading newspapers and watching television around the clock, chain-smoking Indonesian clove cigarettes, eating nothing but hot fudge sundaes, he chortled like a troll over the naïveté of speculations from even the most intelligent commentators. Twirling his arms like an ingénue in the *corps de ballet*, nearly mad with rapture, he hurled scoops of vanilla ice cream at his television monitors.

He could not be reached for comment. His private pier on Lake Michigan was barricaded with sandbags as crack marksmen from Paraguay were dispatched to the machine gun nests. His home militia was ordered to defend the palace from aerial approach with bazookas and flame-throwers. Furious reporters beat their fists on Jimmy's towering stone walls until the granite ran with blood. The crowd of reporters and onlookers surrounding the palace swelled to cover ten city blocks. Gardens of neighboring mansions were stomped into muddy cesspools. Slow children and unfortunate cats were crushed. No one cared. The deaths went unreported. Jimmy let them threaten, plead, bleat. Nothing could break his silence.

After several weeks of seclusion, Jimmy whimsically made his first public appearance on a cable access station in Scranton, Pennsylvania. News and entertainment moguls watched their sets in glassy-eyed fury as Jimmy chatted sociably with Edna Corngold, a woman only six years his junior. Edna's show typically covered gardening, embroidery, and duplicate bridge, but she had made an exception for Jimmy. Wearing a white suit and pink shirt, Jimmy flirted wickedly with Edna for several minutes, telling her that a good sex life begins at one hundred, then began educating the American public about his new product. The rumors were true, he stated. His first movie would be silent.

"I see it as a tribute," he told Edna. "*Un hommage* to the stars from the silent era who will appear in Incarnaction productions. An original score is being written exclusively for the film. The London Philharmonic will perform it at the premiere. No one has seen anything like this for close to a century, Edna."

Aside from wishing to honor the stars of the silent screen, Jimmy had a personal desire to restore the silent movie to its former grandeur. Talking pictures, he claimed, had ruined the motion picture industry. For most of his life he had missed the elegant silent pictures of his boyhood.

"Don't you agree, dear?" He took his host's wrinkled hand in his. Edna bobbed her head, enrapt. As he rambled through his memories of *Intolerance*, the original *Ben-Hur*, and other silent classics, his famous cobalt eyes misted. From a pocket he pulled a handkerchief the size of a pillowcase and honked into it unabashedly. "I guess you need to be very old like me or Edna here to understand what I mean," he choked into the camera. Sagging in her wheel chair, Edna suddenly burst into wet panting sobs. Jimmy joined her in a good cry for the old days.

No one knew that only a week earlier Jimmy had attempted to murder the scientist in charge of mixing his movie's dialogue track.

"It just won't work," the woman gasped as her co-workers dragged Jimmy away from her and lifted her from the floor. He had tackled her from behind,

knocking her over like a bag of grain and landing on her back. Before the others could intervene, Jimmy jerked a telephone from a table and began wrapping the cord around her neck.

"No one says 'won't' to me!" Drool flew from his thin white lips. "Fix it! Make it work!"

"You don't understand," she told him, still clutching her throat as she shakily stood up. "Your process, whatever it really is, makes the images move well enough." A tooth popped out of her mouth and plunked onto the floor as she spoke. Everyone looked down at it, then back at her. "But it would take years," she continued, licking blood from her lips, "to synchronize the actions of the actors' lips and facial muscles with the words in the script. Maybe decades."

"What about replacing their mouths with CGI images?" Jimmy demanded. "What happened to that idea?"

"We had to give it up," the woman answered, slowly retreating behind a lab table as she spoke. "Replacing facial quadrants on all the actors in a feature film would require millions of complicated images. And even if we had the time, the final product would look crude beyond belief."

"Nora's right," added another scientist, an alcoholic phonologist fired from Louisiana State University. "And we're still not sure that the fake voices of the dead actors will be very convincing, not to mention being aesthetically displeasing."

Apoplectic, his forehead bulging with engorged veins, Jimmy bounded forward and took a roundhouse swing at the linguist. "Aesthetics my bony ass!" he cried, wrapping his arms around his chest and shaking with anger. "What the hell is wrong here? I create *life* for you morons and you can't fix the lousy soundtrack?"

Stepping in front of the phonologist, who had easily dodged the punch, another woman on the team spoke up. A former cult director with a degree in film from NYU, Jimmy had lured her to Incarnaction with promises of promoting her new film at Cannes. "The job might be easier, Mr. Rapar, if the film didn't have *so much* dialogue. Your shooting script has all the characters talking their heads off. In the classroom scene alone, the Judy Garland character reads almost three pages aloud from Hegel."

"She's right, Jimmy," said Nora, trying to sound conciliatory. "Make your movie more like a silent film. Rely on the visuals, not the words. That's what critics want."

"I hate silent films!" Jimmy screamed, stalking toward her. "They're like sex without sweat! Those stupid title cards with flowery borders and those gaping expressions that make you think a locomotive is bearing down on the actor!" He swept a load of recording devices from the table and threw himself across the black tabletop. Seeing Jimmy's long grabby fingers coming for her throat again, Nora collapsed on the floor. "And don't call me Jimmy!" he shouted down at her, his head hanging over the edge. Nora covered her head with her arms, sobbing.

He fired the entire crew on the spot, but two days later they were forgiven and summoned back to the central production unit. Jimmy had found his solution. Not only would the film be silent, it would be so relentlessly silent as to eschew verbal communication completely.

"Eyes and faces, faces and eyes," Jimmy chanted rhythmically. "Breasts and throats and pecs and thighs." He loped around the lab, white hair flowing down his back. "Steroid biceps and anorexic waists, smoking guns and carnival lights." Gesturing at the ceiling as though it were a vast screen, he dragged Nora with him

by her hand, occasionally pausing to embrace her with fierce intensity. “Bessie, my one true love, put those faces up there and make magic for me. We’ll make the damn audience give up talking themselves!” Nora stared up at Jimmy’s metallic gaze, her eyes alight with terror. Above her neck brace, she tried to give him a nod.

Part biblical epic, part drawing room comedy, and part Jacobean revenge tragedy, the first production of Incarnaction Pictures boldly crossed marketable genre categories. The principal cast included Clark Gable, Mary Pickford, Natalie Wood, Bette Davis, Spencer Tracy, Greta Garbo, Joan Bennett, Vivien Leigh, Paul Robeson, Orson Wells, W. C. Fields, Vilma Banky, Rudolph Valentine, Pola Negri, Groucho Marx, Lawrence Oliver, Bruce Lee, Elvis Presley, Zasu Pitts, Burt Lancaster, Agnes Moorehead, Ramone Navarro, Marion Marsh, Rock Hudson, Hattie McDaniel, Marlene Dietrich, Gloria Swanson, Buster Keaton, Joan Crawford, Rin-Tin-Tin, Comet, King Kong, and Marie Dressler. Lillian and Dorothy Gish and River Phoenix appeared in cameo roles as Numidian slave girls. Non-dead actors appeared only as extras in crowd scenes.

Jimmy’s greed to pack the film’s publicity campaign with as many mythic names as possible resulted in a Ziegfeldian revolving birthday cake slathered with icing ornaments of faces dormant for decades in the public consciousness. Despite the running time of over seven hours, no star is seen for longer than a few minutes. Even the six major characters (played by Davis, Marx, Garbo, Presley, Ball, and Kong) receive no more than ten minutes of screen time each. The prologue begins with a Noel Coward-style soiree attended by bored socialites. A scream from the cook (Pickford) interrupts a placid game of croquet when she discovers the naked corpses of her employer’s son (Valentino) and a lascivious gardener (Wells). With much breast-beating and hair-pulling, the cook tells the lady of the manor (Ball) what she has found. This scene is interspersed with flashback shots of the two men making violent love in the butler’s pantry, the camera cross-cutting between heaving body parts and low-angle shots of croquet balls shooting through wickets. Refusing to believe that her son could be attracted to a gardener, Ball reveals herself to be a psychic and abruptly begins to channel the spirit of her great-grandmother (Wood). With many stage smirks and arched eyebrows, the jaded guests participate in the séance, but just as the spirit is about to reveal the murderer’s identity, a parapsychological catastrophe strikes. All of the guests are flung to various moments in the earth’s past and future. The teleportation segment features a chaotic swirl of iris shots, matte work, and fluctuating rack focus. In a jarring allusion to the Odessa steps sequence in Eisenstein’s *Potemkin*, Pickford flees the metaphysical carnage by running down a marble staircase while pushing a laundry cart. An hour-long montage follows in which Moorehead, Banky, Lee, Leigh, Jannings, and other party guests arrive at the Battle of Hastings, a brothel in the circus of Constantinople, the Janis Joplin gig at Woodstock I, and other unexpected locales. None of these characters is ever seen again. As the montage ends, several guests are revealed landing in the film’s two key settings, Judea on the eve of the Battle of Jericho and Oxford Castle in 1152 on the morning of Empress Matilda’s (Garbo’s) escape from King Stephen (Groucho) across the frozen River Thames.

At this point, narrative coherence disintegrates rapidly, the biblical and medieval plots being linked by several characters from the séance (Dressler, Fields, Bennett, Olivier, Rin-Tin-Tin) who somehow have gained the power to transport themselves from one time period to another. Still dressed (excluding the

dog) in tuxedos and gauzy Vic-wardian lawn frocks, they flit through the time portals carrying messages and warnings concerning the complex Hebrew, Assyrian, Anglo-Saxon, and Viking strategy sessions that are developed in excruciating detail for the next three hours. With minimal use of title cards, these sub-plots amount to little more than varied set-pieces of personal and mass bloodshed. Characters are tortured, maimed, raped, and killed with the rapidity of chickens being dismembered and packaged on a conveyor belt. (Crawford gives the best acting of her career as a maddened pharaoh (Presley) slowly broils her to death over a bed of flaming pitch.)

Moving into the climax, the screen divides vertically between the three temporal settings. In the far left column, the heroine of the biblical plot (Davis) entreats Goliath (King Kong) to elope with her to "some country that's not so stinking hot." Simultaneously, the center of the screen reveals the Empress Matilda (in an outright refutation of documented history) murdering her cousin King Stephen and his Danish general, Ivar Blood-Axe, by pushing them off an ice sheet and watching them sink to their deaths under the weight of chain-mail and boar-tusk helmet. In the screen's right column, back at the garden party, Ball, Pickford, and Wood merge their psychic energies to draw all the surviving characters back to the present. The biblical and medieval sectors of the screen begin to dissolve, the sharp black and white contrasts that have dominated the cinematography fading into fuzzy greys. Goliath's and Matilda's faces are frozen in enormous, over-exposed close-ups as the guests materialize at Ball's estate. As the right column expands across the triptych, the camera slowly retreats for a high crane shot revealing bloody, wounded, and diseased socialites scattered prostrate about the croquet lawn. (Only the Davis character has an enigmatic smile of satisfaction on her face.) A final image of Ball's Gatsbyesque mansion, now revealed, without explanation, to be a mass of smoldering black timbers, is superimposed upon the hostess's face. Reflecting the dying light from her burned home, Ball's eyes are ravaged by the pain of seeing her friends and home in ruins. Alluding to the peace montage from *Intolerance*, the final shot of a trampled flower bed suggests that Ball now realizes that her son, after all, probably did have a thing for burly gardeners.

In its first month of national distribution, the film out-grossed the combined total of all films released in 2000. The golden bridge leading to a new era had appeared after all, merely one year late. Critical response to the film was no less torrential than the popular reaction, ranging from the superlative to the excremental. Jimmy's film was the zenith of tactlessness, bloated production standards, and atheistic deconstructionist anarchy. For others, Jimmy had crystallized postmodern aesthetics, bringing textual *verfremdung* to sadistic but exhilarating extremes. His film formed the ultimate social critique of the "lost generation," the "me generation," the "punk generation," "generation X," and the nascent millennial generation. The first scholarly analyses of the film were completed within weeks, and soon pop culture theorists of every variety were spawning a constant flow of unreadable publications. Ph.D students across the country boldly dumped computer files holding nearly-finished dissertations. No one wanted to write on anything but Jimmy's film.

Swelling the tide of popular, critical, and scholarly mania still higher, lawsuits flooded the courts. Before the film's premiere had ended, litigation was initiated by no fewer than 500 separate parties. Lawyers representing descendants of dead stars from seven different generations sued for libel, slander, and

unlicensed use of private names and photographic images. The opus was also made a target by its potpourri of ethnicities, races, and sexual orientations. Spearheaded by the Viking Anti-Defamation League, class action suits were filed by coalitions of gays, feminists, blacks, Jews, American and Maori Indians, by incest-, molestation-, and impoliteness-survivors, by Arabs, Roman Catholics, the Coptic Church, the SPCA, and the Lawn and Garden Workers Union. Forming a third front, all major film studios in America pooled their assets to break Jimmy's corporate backbone and to have his film withdrawn and destroyed. Far from being cowed, Jimmy snorted and charged like a bull, so invigorated by the challenge that his artificial heart required a tune-up to keep even with his brain energy output. In roaring good humor, he reminded reporters that his own legal team was large enough to populate Burbank. He controlled state and federal judges throughout California and New York and played billiards regularly with two Supreme Court justices. Jimmy was confident he could keep his film in circulation and his studio free of production bans until he died. He couldn't care less what happened afterward.

One night in February, Jimmy clicked off his bank of monitors and went to bed early. A Chicago station had broadcast a special on the first convention held by the United Film Church of America, an organization formed in the cultural shockwaves of Jimmy's movie. Adherents to the sect believed that Jimmy had resurrected the dead actors to create the third millennium's first sacred text. It was fitting, they argued, that the world's newest bible should be conveyed through a non-print medium. As proof of their faith, church leaders insisted that no one could explain in scientific terms exactly how Jimmy had devised his special effects. The believers referred to the film's special effects as Jimmy's 'divine shewings.'

Cozy in an ermine nightgown and a striped stocking cap that trailed to the floor, Jimmy left his communications center for the long walk to his bedroom. As sheet metal doors slid shut behind him, the corridor's high walls and steepled ceiling glowed in iridescent green. The mirrored floor, studded with uncut emeralds from Jimmy's Peruvian mines, was also tinted green. The train of Jimmy's gown swept lightly across tile and gems, the corridor's only noise the patter of his bare feet. Humming, staring into the green reflections at his feet, he imagined himself as a film image. Viewed from the doorway behind him, the striped candy cane of his hat made him a child lost in a cathedral, a cartoon prepubescent from a Disney animated feature. But from the front, viewed in a low-angle shot, his streaming hair suggested an unquiet blur of spirit, a Dickensian phantom with greenish shadows carved into the face's parchment skin.

Pausing at a window overlooking Lake Michigan, he stared into the darkness spreading up his palace walls. Fog obscured the lights of Chicago's Loop, but close to shore pinpoint lights flickered through the blackness. Jimmy recognized them as ships keeping watch on his property. Reporters, film students, disciples from the United Film Church: their small craft filled his harbor day and night, waiting. He nodded in satisfaction, then continued to his suite. Soon he was tucked into the conjugal bed of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln, which he had purchased at a bargain price when the federal government needed cash to pay social security benefits. Ravel's "Sarabande," his favorite piece of music, melted into the bright colors of his dreams. With a bony finger, he pressed a button that lowered the lights to a whispering blue. He slept.

He awoke coughing and wheezing, opening his eyes to harsh white light. *What the hell?* he thought, jerking himself up in bed.

"Deal!" in a bass voice from the room's farthest corner.

“Hey!” Jimmy yelled. “Who the hell’s in this room? Who’s smoking that stinking cigar?”

Someone had set up a poker table in his chamber. Four men sat around it in club chairs, chips piled before them, ashtrays at their hands. “How’d you get in here?” he yelled again. “Speak quick! I’ve got a loaded gun here.” He was lying, but as he swung himself out of bed, his foot came down on a button that would call fifty guards to his room in under twenty seconds.

One man set his cards down on the table, shaking his head as though with remorse. “The putz is awake.” he said. “So now we talk business. But later we finish this hand. No looking.”

“Get out,” Jimmy snapped. “In two seconds you’ll have the business ends of machine guns shoved up your asses.” But the four men stood up and stepped closer. Jimmy drew back, uncertain. Bald and fat, they wore monogrammed Turkish bathrobes that reached to their knees. Their tanned skin glowed with California health. All three wore large diamond rings.

“It seems we have some contractual difficulties with your new film, Jimmy,” one of them said. “Serious difficulties,” another added, puffing on a long Cuban cigar with black wrapping. “The central problem,” the third man said, “is that we want to know how you did it.”

“Talk to my lawyers,” Jimmy snarled. “And don’t call me Jimmy.” But his hands shook as he talked. His foot throbbed from thumping the floor button.

“Saul here says it has something to do with that temple you excavated in Iraq. Some kind of pagan thing from even before Moses brought down the tablets, wasn’t it? Come on, Jimmy, don’t be such a *goy*, was it the temple? Some kind of deal with God knows what kind of pagan idol? People said you spent days down there, all alone. Then you sneaked out all the contents at night with your air force. *Oy*, I wish I could’ve seen the faces on those Arabs when they found out how you had robbed them! World War III is what it almost was. And no one’s seen those artefacts yet, I don’t think.”

“Go to hell!” Jimmy yelled. “The transfer was covered by the ’98 Global Agreement for Antiquities Trade. I won all the lawsuits.”

“Then maybe something less exotic, more your usual type of thing?” This one wore a gold chain around his neck, the heavy links lying on a bed of chest hair below his throat. “That physicist you made pals with, the one who disappeared until they found his body in your lake in Switzerland? So maybe he told you some little thing you wanted to keep all to yourself?”

“Or maybe you are the new messiah, like the nuts say?” suggested the third man, exhaling a cloud of cigar smoke. “Is that what you want us to believe, *meshuggener*?” They all laughed and slapped each other on the backs, puffing on their cigars.

With a last kick at the button and a desperate look at the door, Jimmy suddenly reached behind his bed’s headboard and pulled a lever. A floor-length mirror shot upward, and he lunged into the black rectangle. As the mirror slammed down behind him, he could still hear the fat men laughing.

“Where’s the stupid lights?” he shouted, groping through blackness. The hidden room was stocked with food and loaded with communication devices for sending distress calls. Groping through the stale air, he shuffled and slid across the metal floor, hoping to bump into the command console.

“So this is what kind of hospitality?” a voice said. “We come here to talk things over with you nice and friendly and you slam a mirror in our faces? So now you’re Alice in Wonderland, already?”

Jimmy screamed, leaping into the air and running forward blindly, arms outstretched. By luck, one hand came down on a spring-loaded panel that retracted a segment of the wall. Guided by the whir of gears and pulleys, he took two long strides through the opening. The train of his robe was caught by the closing door, but the smooth fur pulled off his shoulders easily, sliding down his rib-cage and hips as he ran forward. Naked, he began sprinting up a circular staircase leading to the summit of his palace’s highest tower. He reached the top wheezing like an ironmonger’s bellows, the artificial joints in his knees, hips, shoulders, and elbows cutting into flesh and bone like razors. Collapsing against the crash-bar on a steel-plated door, he staggered from the darkness into a freezing, starry night. With shaking hands, he braced the door with an iron bar before falling to his knees on the icy stones. Knowing that a fleet of helicopters had been summoned automatically when the seal on the door was broken, he curled himself into a tight ball, wheezing and coughing. The blasting Canadian wind frosted his skin a bright red. How could Jimmy Rapar, the world’s most powerful man, be frozen raw at the top of a tower. The Inuit man who was the subject of *Nanook of the North* had later died of hunger and exposure on an ice floe. Was Jimmy Rapar no better?

“You better hope you’re the messiah,” one of the fat men said. “Good way to catch the influenza, lying on the cold ground like that.” They all nodded their heads sadly, staring down at Jimmy.

At the sound of their voices, Jimmy jerked himself upright. The men stood several feet away, blurred by wisps of fog blowing across the battlements. Jimmy retreated, his mouth hanging open, his blue eyes white with rage and frustration. When his back hit solid stone, he turned and leaped onto the crenellated ledge encircling the tower’s surface.

“Get off my tower!” he yelled, hopping about on the narrow edge as he tried to balance himself against the winds. “My choppers are on their way, and they’re all armed!” He raised his skinny arms above his head, white hair streaming around his shoulders. Against the night, his body was a sharp sliver of fish-bone vibrating in a black wind.

“Look, Jimmy—oh, you don’t want to be called Jimmy, right? Fine with us, Mr. Rapar. All we want here is just the secret of how you brought back all those stars for your *dreck* of a film. ’Fess up and tell us the big secret, Mr. Rapar. You know, share the technology, spread the wealth, just like they did when talkies came in. Then we go away just as nice as you please. Wadda ya say, Rapar?”

“That’s ‘Ra*pár*’!” Jimmy yelled. “Stress on the second syllable, moron! My name’s a palindrome, not a damned homonym for a felony!!”

Then Jimmy’s foot slipped.

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In April of 2001, the first production of Incarnaction Pictures won fourteen Academy Awards. Attending the ceremony as Jimmy’s guests, unknown individuals claiming to be Agnes Moorehead, Elvis Presley, and Greta Garbo accepted acting honors. The dead stars (or their impersonators) gave special thanks to their producer for jump-starting their careers. The eleven non-dead acting nominees boycotted the ceremony, releasing bitter statements about the unfairness of

competing with dead people. But they found no support. Public sympathy for the dead, whom many perceived as being disadvantaged, caused the living actors to be accused of discrimination. To retaliate against this unexpected spin in spectator consciousness, the Screen Actors Guild passed a new policy forbidding membership to any allegedly dead actors who might apply for membership.

Jimmy himself, however, failed to appear.

Messiah Epiphany: The Jimmy I. Rapar Movie, the second release from Incarnaction Pictures, made its premiere in December 2002. Greeted by enthusiasm surpassing that of the earlier film, the epic biography of Jimmy's life monopolized the film markets so completely that three major studios declared bankruptcy. Publicity for the film was fueled by Jimmy's strange absence. Unseen in public for over a year, he was rumored to be dead, or kidnapped by the church consecrated to his films, or *en route* to Mars in his private spaceship. No one knew who controlled Incarnaction Pictures and Jimmy's other holdings.

Devotees of the United Film Church proclaimed that the new film represented Jimmy's 'Hysterical Testament,' the completion to the Judaeo-Christian testament sequence. Like the Jewish Bible's prefigurations of Christ, they argued, Jimmy was allegorized in the first film and made flesh in the second. The Church Council issued treatises interpreting Jimmy's many miracles in the new film. Skeptical hosts of late-night comedy shows made cruel jokes, but even the most confirmed cynics could not deny the power of the film's final eerie images. Jimmy's naked withered body silhouetted against the storm raging around his tower made fine Roman spectacle, but the final seconds after his fall from the balcony left viewers shaken and disoriented. Some say that Jimmy saved himself by clutching the end of a rope ladder thrown from a helicopter. Others claim that he fell like a shot into Leviathan, black Lake Michigan. Most church members insist that Jimmy floated in the air like a spectral flying reptile before disappearing in a flash of blue light. Variations on each scenario are as diverse and unlimited as the number of spectators. Even now, after this miracle of infinite variety has become canonized by church officials, Jimmy's face speaks differently to every audience. Paralyzed in enormous close-up, laughing like a demon, screaming, smiling with beatitude, his eyes glazed or clear, his small white teeth clamped on his pink tongue, his lifted, peeled, sanded facial skin so close to the camera it becomes the topography of a desert, a planet, the wilderness of his life, clamantis, spanning an entire century, one extreme border in a dead age and the other in the flowering gold of a new era.

All the Weeks of Easter

Shortly after dawn of Easter morning in 1994, a young woman disappeared from her job at a convenience store in a rural area of northern New York State. After more than a month of searching, officials arrested a local resident and charged him with kidnapping. He claims to be innocent. Authorities have released no information concerning the accused man's statements. The woman remains missing. The search continues.

The tall man entered the store first. The short fat man followed close behind, wearing a red plaid hunter's cap with the ear flaps pulled down. The hat's strap was buckled tight under his chin, pressing into the loose flesh under his jaw. The two men did not walk down either of the store's two short aisles, did not walk over to the wire newspaper rack. Most people who walk straight up to the counter have pumped gas, but the men had left their black Econoline van parked at the curb, engine running, headlamps burning. Flickers of snow jumped in the high beams, caught in the narrow space between the van and the store's dirty plate glass windows.

Just past dawn, the tree-edged sky spring water bright, but snow. She was standing behind the counter on an overturned plastic milk crate, organizing packs of cigarettes in an overhead bin. "Hello," she called when she heard the door open, but she kept her eyes on her work. Facing the open area before the register, her torso was framed between the bottom of the bin and the counter top. When they lined up at the counter, pressing their stomachs tight against it, she ducked her head down to take a look, her long brown hair swinging to one side. The crate skidded an inch on the linoleum floor, gave a loud creak. "Happy Easter, guys! Be with you in a sec."

The short man chewed at the edges of a red moustache that curled into his mouth. "Yeah, morning," he said suddenly, as though he had thought about it carefully. The tall man shifted his eyes to look down at him. "Shut your dumb face," he muttered, raising two grease-covered hands above the counter. The short man gulped as the hands shot forward like pistons. One caught her square in the stomach, the other above her left breast. Her breath wooshed out in a wheezy

bellow, taking with it thoughts of going to mass with her family at eleven, of entering the State University of New York at Oswego in a few more months, of the end of her shift in another forty-five minutes.

The strangeness of snow on an Easter morning is something that people don't soon forget. And a late Easter, too, her mother had commented as she was leaving the house just before midnight. "They say we'll get accumulation. You be careful drivin' and call us when you're fixin' to leave. Daddy'll come get you in the truck if the snow's bad."

Her head hit the particle board behind the counter with a loud crack. One flailing arm knocked over a small case holding tins of chewing tobacco. When she looked up, blinking a strand of hair away from her eyes, the tall man had a gun drawn. The short one heaved himself up on the counter, swung his legs over, then plopped down beside her in rubber boots. She tried to shoot up to her feet, but something was wrong with her back. She was only up on one elbow when the short man casually knocked her back down.

"Her mouth first. Hurry it up."

The wet moustache bobbed up and down. He pushed her over on her stomach, got one knee into the small of her back, then fished in a pocket of his winter parka until he found a spool of grey duct tape. He unwound a short piece, held it up with the roll dangling, and groped through another pocket for a knife. When the tape was slapped over her mouth, he brought out a long yellow nylon cord.

Past the wide, snow-swept parking lot, past the gleaming pumps on the center island, past the older pump for diesel fuel sitting alone in one corner, the first full bars of morning scraped over the forest-covered hill. The light flowed down the snow cover, spilling wide through the intersection of two county routes. At the center of the cross, swirls of new snow flying across it, a traffic light blinked. Amber in one direction, red in the other.

The tall man dropped her legs onto the ground when they reached the van. The man with the hunting cap sagged under the weight of her upper body, but he didn't fall. The tall man jerked open the van's sliding door, then the two of them hoisted her in.

"Get the hell outta here," the tall man said, jumping into the van and rolling her over so she was farther inside. "What you waiting for?" he hissed. "You gonna drive or what?"

The short man jumped straight into the air, leaving two cleated footprints in the snow. He hit the ground shuffling, making for the driver's door. The tall man was on his knees among a litter of empty beer cans and dark iron tools. He grabbed the door's handle and pulled hard.

The caution light flashed hard through the white snowy air. Her blue eyes, wide and staring above the tape, watched the rectangle of morning world contract in a vertical line from left to right. For a moment, a thin strip of light held the edge of door and van from meeting. Far in the distance, in the direction of home, she saw the 104B road sign.

"Move it, you twerp!" The van lurched backward, and the tall man pulled the door. It clicked shut.

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Her mother was staring into the oval mirror above the mantel, brushing her hair again. By this time, the last mass of Easter Sunday would already be into the Litany of the Eucharist. But she knew that their friends would be visiting in the church basement for a long time after the service. If Darleen showed up in time, they might go over for coffee and pastries and gossip. When the phone rang, she set the brush down on a table, walked slowly across the pumpkin pine floor that she and her husband had cut and installed themselves.

"Ellie? That you?"

"It's me, Frank. You talk to her? What'd she say?"

"Look, Ellie." A long pause. She heard the sheriff swallowing, then talking to someone at the other end.

"Frank?"

"Yeah, sorry, I'm still here. Look, Ellie, you and Sam might want to come down here." A thick bubbling smoker's cough, then another pause. "Come down right away," he repeated, his voice still thick, but more clear.

She walked into the kitchen with the phone at her ear, stood by the sink looking out at the redwood deck and the woods beyond. "Darleen?" The word sank under the hum from the refrigerator. "What're you saying, Frank?"

"Look, Ellie, probably nothing's wrong. She's just not here, is all. Her car's here and her pocketbook and coat're in the back room. But she's nowheres around. When Mac Monroe's boy come in to start his shift at eight, she was already gone."

"Sam," she said, her hand with the phone dropping to her side. Raising her voice: "Sam, come in the kitchen here now!"

"It's too early to get upset, Ellie," the voice continued. "Way way way too early. Listen, you think maybe one of her friends come by and she left early with them for some reason, it being Easter and all?"

Sam stopped at the door, looked at his wife standing in a square of high noon sunlight. Outside the double thermal window, the snow had finally stopped, leaving a smooth sculpted edge between white fields and cloudy blue. He tried to take the phone from her hand. but she held onto it tight, still staring out the window.

"What's wrong, Ellie? Who you talkin' to honey?"

But she kept staring out the window, saying nothing. Repeating his wife's name, Sam pried her fingers away from the telephone.

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Better than a hundred people milled around the unpaved parking lot in front of the low building with whitewashed concrete walls. Two years ago, the residents of Scriba, Texas, Lycoming, and other towns north of Fulton had raised enough money to put up the building. It was officially designated as headquarters for the volunteer fire department, but almost every day some civic group held a meeting there. The year that Darleen O'Donnell disappeared from her job, Ellie was the auxiliary's untitled chairperson. She was the one who coaxed the local Catholic church into approving the casino night that brought in almost three thousand dollars for the new gym at the high school. At her mother's urging, Darleen had spent weeks canvassing merchants for door prizes and cash donations along the southeastern curve of Lake Ontario. Navigating her fourth-hand Escort through winding strings of road as far south as Sodus Bay and all the way north to Hungerford Corners, she ventured farther from home than ever before. Sam had

wanted her to carry Ellie's handgun in the glove compartment. You never know what could happen, he said. Those back roads at night with no streetlights. Pays to be careful. But Ellie and Darleen, teasing him about all the guns he owned, talked him into buying her a can of mace instead.

Green rubber hip boots, hunting vests with rows of canvas loops for cartridge holders, wool watch caps, dull gleams of iron shotgun barrel. They stood in puddles of icy water, spat tobacco in mud troughs left by jeeps and trucks.

"Ground's too mushy to get any leads with the dogs. Moisture in the air cuts the smell."

"Where'd you hear that from?"

"Know that footpath that cuts south from Old Fort Ontario and runs down to the Barge Canal? That's where I'm lookin' today. Perfect place for somebody to hide out."

"Should've brung in the trooper chopper first day."

"Too late now to find nothin' but a body."

"Shut up that talk, fool. There's Sam's truck."

Sam eased his pick-up into a tight spot next to a mud-spattered black van with blue-tinted windows. When he and Ellie stepped out, the men slowly drew closer, shy, but pulled toward the center. "God bless you this day, Ellie," called out one of the men. She turned her head to look for the voice while Sam came around and stood at her side. He said something to her in a low whisper that no one could hear. She shook her head, but he prodded her with one elbow, and she nodded. Pulling down the truck's tailgate, he helped her up into the box. A big-hipped woman in blue jeans, she set one knee down on the edge and scrambled up. When she stood, her face was flushed.

Missing, Presumed Kidnapped. Darleen O'Donnell. Born 1976. Long chestnut hair, hazel eyes. May be wearing plaid Syracuse University sweatshirt. Last seen 6:15 AM Easter at Sun's-A-Rising Convenience Mart, center North Hellespont. $10,000 for information leading to her return.

Ellie's T-shirt was a 3x-large that hung almost to her knees. Underneath it she wore a pink insulated coat, making her look inflated, a white billow with an enormous picture of her daughter stretched across her chest. The picture was identical to the one on the five by ten-foot poster nailed up outside the building's front door. Framed by curling hair falling past her shoulders, Darleen's face smiled at the crowd. Most of the men gathering around Ellie wore white badges bearing the same picture. Around her face circled the sentence "God help her come home."

"Thanks, boys. Sam and me are grateful as ever. We know you're givin' up time that you need to spend on your own farms and jobs."

"Time not lost if we find her today, Ellie!" Some of the men clapped their hands. Others gave their agreement in wordless hoots. Ellie turned her head to take in the sight of all of them. She smiled heavily, like the general of a long battle heartened by the array of her troops.

"Darleen's a big girl, you all know that. Captain of the girls' basketball team for three years now. No one's gonna keep her against her will for long. Don't listen —Sam and me pray every night you won't—to what the news programs are sayin'. And she's right close by us, boys. Sam and me both know it in our heart of hearts."

They cheered again, and her smile changed to a fixed, hard line. "The officers'll be out in a minute with your orders for today. The men with the hounds should be here any minute and the helicopter starts searchin' at nine."

Ellie turned her face up to the low-hanging clouds, clasped her hands and pressed them to her chest. “Watch over these good men and women today, Lord. And let one of’em find my Darleen and bring her back to me for dinner. I’m makin’ her favorite dish tonight, breaded pork chops, same as I’ve done every night since the day of your resurrection, just so I could have the leftovers should she come home all of a sudden. Lord, you came back when no one thought you could. You came back and walked on this earth for the weeks of Easter. Darleen’ll be the next one back, if you let it happen.”

Three men reached out to lift her down. As she walked away, splashing through puddles in her green rubber boots, hands reached out to pat her shoulders. A few gloved hands stroked lightly at her grey-flecked brown hair. Her shoulders were hunched and shaking when she reached Sam at the red door to the hall. He put his arm around her and pulled her away from the search party into the low fluorescent light.

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“No one’s given up hope yet.” The girl shook her head, looking through the window, not at the reporter. “No one I know, anyway.”

“It’s been over three full weeks, Suzanne. You really think everyone still believes she’s alive?”

“I do,” she answered. “Darleen’s been my best friend since kindergarten. If anything had happened to her, I would feel it. So would Ellie and Sam and lots of other people here. You ask anyone.”

The man leaned forward a bit, trying to tum her attention away from the window. “Something indeed has happened to her, Suzanne.” He kept his voice low, as though he were telling a secret.

She turned to look at him, spoke angrily. “You know what I mean, sir.” Behind them, women were laying out a long banquet table with covered dishes and sheet pans loaded with rolls, muffins, and sliced bread, aluminum bowls full of cut broccoli and cauliflower and carrots.

“All the way from Rochester that last couple came,” one woman said to another. “And they sayin’ on the news that the search is useless. What do they know?” Sam and Ellie were sitting close to the door, just past the table where Darleen’s aunt and uncle were taking ten dollar bills from people entering the hall. After getting their hands stamped with the word “missing” in black letters, people stopped to exchange words with the mother and father before moving onto the food tables or to the display of T-shirts and badges and posters or the beer counter set up in one comer. Four men with long hair and beards were setting up speakers next to the portable stage unfolded at the hall’s far end. As the room filled, they took their instruments from cases and began warming up.

“Here they are!” someone whooped, pointing out a window. The singer and guitar player turned to look. The sound of voices and the clatter of dishes stopped.

“You see?” Suzanne said, standing up. “You think they would have come all this way if they thought the search was useless? Do you think all these people would be here for the Night of Hope party?” She looked down at the reporter, spots of pink on her high cheekbones, her dark eyes bright. “When you said it was bad, all the money being spent on searching for Darleen when poor children in the slums are being shot down by their own neighbors every day, what did you think

Sam and Ellie would think about that? Was that supposed to make us feel guilty? Is that a reason to give up looking for Darleen?"

He opened his mouth, shifted in his chair, but she turned on her heel and walked away, leaving him looking after her.

Ten members of the Oklahoma Mounted Rescue League were riding into the parking lot on steaming brown quarterhorses. When the team's leader dismounted, Sam and Ellie stepped forward to welcome them. The itinerant priest from the Oswego diocese gave a blessing for what he called this new and hopefully last phase of the search. The other team members dismounted, their sleek Marlborough field boots sinking to the laces in the mud. Mobile news units converged on the horsemen, shot footage of the horses, interviewed the leader, recorded recaps of the search operations for their late evening broadcasts.

"About two hundred people are crowded into this small local hall," one reporter was saying. A few feet away, a woman from a different station spoke into another camera: "Morale here has been boosted again by the arrival of these men from Oklahoma, but solid information on Darleen O'Donnell's whereabouts—" "You know the story," said a deputy sheriff into another microphone. "The cash register tape says her last sale was at 5:23 AM. Wasn't no money taken from the till. Her purse was there, her car keys was there. Nothin' missin' but the girl. You heard of people lookin' for a needle in a haystack, haven't you? Well, we're lookin' for the haystack."

Darkness fell with thunder and fresh rain. The fire hall's windows bright yellow. Pairs of dancers pressed closely to the stage, brushing against the singer standing at the very edge. Around the perimeter of the hall, people sat on benches, eating, talking, drinking beer from large plastic cups. The reporter from Syracuse stopped dancing, wiping sweat from his forehead. He looked at Suzanne with a question as the band changed to a slow REM ballad.

"Listen here, my sister and my brother. What would you care if you lost the other? I always wonder why did we bother, distanced from one, deaf to the other."

Suzanne shrugged at the man, pulled back her hair, then stepped closer and let him put his arms around her shoulders.

In a far comer, a spare man spat tobacco juice on the floor. "Look at that wise-ass reporter slow-dancing with Susie Richardson." He pointed with a jerk of his head.

The short man at his side bobbed his plaid hunting cap up and down, his eyes darting from the dancers to his companion.

"She ain't old enough to be dancin' with him. Not that fruit." He spat again. The short man stared up at him, his mouth hanging open.

Ellie and Sam rose to leave, began shaking hands and embracing people nearest them. A reporter came up, but a large man in a thermal undershirt and suspenders waved her away. "Enough, enough already," he clucked. At the door, Ellie turned to wave at the crowd. "God bless you all!" she called, but only those standing closest to the door heard her.

Ellie and Sam climbed into their truck alone, the headlights cutting two cold white lines through a cloak of surface fog into the dense forest opposite. The moon was nearly full, almost dead center in the dome of sky, high above cloudy black shoals. A few miles from the hall, the road crossed the junction beside the Sun's-A-Rising Convenience Mart. The amber caution light flashed in the dark, the lights above the gas pumps burned hot and bright. A high school senior stood in the open doorway, smoking a cigarette and holding a broom, looking out at the night. The

parking lot was empty, strands of damp fog circling around the glowing lights like moths trying to enter an open flame.

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Red Moon Mountain got its name by mistake. Or through a deception. Near the end of the real estate boom in the early eighties, a development company from Buffalo decided to put a ski resort on the north face. Before that, people referred to what was little more than a large hill as Bear Mountain, Witch's Mountain, Indian Hill. But when clearing started and the mountain's new owners became the largest employer within fifty miles of North Hellespont, a genuine name, something memorable, was needed. A publicist from the company found an old man who confided the mountain's true local history, passed on to him by his grandfather. After the Civil War, a retired colonel had built a small mansion at the foot of the mountain for his mistress, a native Onondaga Nation woman. For many years, the colonel kept the woman sequestered in the lonely house. Local citizens referred to her as Red Moon. Eventually the colonel went into politics. Fearing scandal or just tired of the woman, he killed her one night with his old cavalry sword and buried her body somewhere on the mountain. The informant couldn't explain to the publicist why the name Red Moon Mountain had never stuck, but he assured her this was the mountain's truthful name. Research proved that the entire story was a myth, but the name Red Moon Mountain sounded marketable. By the time building operations halted when the company went bankrupt in the market crash of 1989, the name was entrenched, along with the new story of how an old local man had filled a slick big-city woman's head with bullshit and she had believed it.

On the first day of May, a Sunday, a raw Canadian wind barreled across a hundred miles of Lake Ontario and funneled down the strip of clear ground cut through the forest for Red Moon Mountain's ski lift. Solid pine forest walls pressed closely on three horsemen slowly riding up the trail. A cold noon light beat down on them, their heads bent forward against the constant stream of wind. The first two men rode in trim English tack, the last one in a scarred western saddle with a slicker tied behind the seat and a lariat hanging from the side. Their horses picked careful paths through the steep channel of dark rippling green. Nearing the summit, they entered a clearing where metal tool sheds had collapsed onto the broken slats of a snow fence. The first man raised his hand and the others stopped. While they waited, he took a small pair of electronic binoculars from a saddlebag and began surveying the landscape spread below him. A strip of gem-like blue, Lake Ontario, just visible in the farthest distance. Slightly closer, the grey cooling towers of Oswego's nuclear energy plant. From there a vast patchwork of deep green forest and land brown from early plowing, filaments of dirt road searching through the county's silences.

"What's that right on the base of this mountain?" He swung one long leg over the horse's neck so he could face the other men, kept his other foot square in the iron.

The men maneuvered their horses closer to each other. The man with western tack squinted against the wind's sting in the direction of the leader's pointing arm. "Oh," with a sigh. "Just Maynard and Jimmy's place."

Not much more than a narrow scar in the dense woods. A few outbuildings and a double-wide trailer with smoke coming from an aluminum chimney. A rotting school bus half-buried in black loam.

"What is it? Who are they?"

The man shrugged, pulling a hand-rolled cigarette from a chest pocket. "It's a farm, I guess you'd say. Last I knew, they got some turkeys and hogs, probably a couple o' cows. Used to have a pumpkin patch. Why?"

"Who's 'they?'''

"Maynard and Jimmy? Just two good old boys. Both born n' bred right here. They been helpin' with the search nearly every day. You prob'ly seen 'em. Drive an '81 van stuck together with spit and Bondo."

The second rider took a look at the site through the leader's binoculars. "What's with that bus?" he asked.

"Use it as a chick coop, I suppose, only it's turkeys 'stead o' chickens. Why?"

"Several places right there to hide something," the leader answered. "Has their property been searched?" His square jaw clamped down hard on the last word. When his tall mare tossed her neck under the pressure of his leg, he lightly jumped to the ground.

"Maynard and Jimmy's?" he hooted. "You think we ought to start doin' house-to-house searches now, friend? Those two boys've been here all their lives, same as me. Sure, they're a little odd, and they're sure as hell poor, like just about everybody around here. Some folks even as say they're queer for each other, even though they're second or third cousins, I forget which. But they're still okay. Don't bother nobody, most o' the time. Jimmy's not real bright, to put it kindly."

All three men had dismounted now. The leader drew a flask of whiskey from his saddlebag and passed it around. The local man lit a fresh cigarette off the end of the first one.

"You guys really doctors?" He took a long pull from the flask, offered his cigarettes to the others. They nodded to his question, waved away the cigarettes. "What kind of doctors? Surgeons or something like that?"

"Dermatologist," the second rider answered. "Curtiss is in radiology." The leader took off his hat and wiped sweat from his brow, ran his hand through short-clipped black hair. "You all don't think it's possible that whoever took the girl is a local resident, do you?"

"Ain't give it much thought, to tell the truth. You guys think it might be?" He looked from one to the other, but they said nothing, observing the clutter of trailer and tilting shacks far below. After a few minutes, the leader took another look. Nothing but a white dog moved at Maynard and Jimmy's farm, sniffing around the edge of the bus sunk in the earth. To the left of the farm, down a dirt road connecting the farm with a paved one-way road, he saw another search party stopped near a footbridge crossing a stream. A pack of dogs ran about furiously in circles, their black-edged mouths flapping open and shut with inaudible howls and barks.

"Somebody's found something." He took down the binoculars to look at the other group, his eyes hard as ice, teeth clamped together. The others began to question him, but he waved them away and marched back to his horse. When they arrived at the site an hour later, the dogs had been taken away and the sheriff had arrived in a jeep. The corpse had been dug up and dragged from its grave beneath an overhang of tangled roots and grass above a low waterfall.

"It's a girl all right, yes sir." The man came running up to the horses, waving his rifle above his head. He tugged at the leg of the man in the western saddle. "Get down here, Stony, you gotta see this. Naked and all-over covered with mud and leaves and her hair's all—shit! My boy threw up on the spot."

“Where’s my Scott? He see it?” The man jumped down from the horse, landing in the wet undergrowth with a thud. “Scott!” he called, peeling into the woods.

“Just wait for the ambulance and the coroner.” The sheriff spoke gravely to his two deputies. “We ain’t moving it ’til he looks at her and we get a stretcher and a bag. Anything might be evidence. Keep all the men away from the body.”

The corpse lay face-down in the moss growing up one side of a dead tree, her shoulders and back and legs covered with mud and leaves. Only the high ovals of her buttocks protruded from the murky ground, a white paper heart pasted to a black page. Several yards away, a group of three men stood with their backs turned to the body, all of them holding rifles with the barrels pointing at the ground. More men squatted near the stream’s bank, smoking cigarettes and talking in low voices. Others paced around between the trees, throwing furtive glances at the body.

The horsemen from Oklahoma walked over to the sheriff and began talking with him. He shook his head several times, but finally took a deep breath and shrugged his shoulders. He led the horsemen over to the dead girl. All three of them knelt down. The two horsemen spoke to each other, then gently rolled the corpse over onto its back. One of them reached down and brushed mud and twigs from the face, then picked some debris from the nostrils and mouth. Wordlessly, the other one took a pair of plastic gloves from his knapsack, snapped them over his hands, and pressed the palms of both hands down on the girl’s waist. Slowly, he worked his hands from one side of the abdomen to the other, then slid them across her chest. Stopping, he looked at his companion, said something in a low voice. When the other man nodded, he slipped his fingers inside a long incision above the girl’s heart. After he removed a wadding of packed dirt and decayed leaves, the cavity began to secrete a greenish fluid. The sides of the wound began to collapse inward, but he deftly held them apart with four fingers of one hand. The sheriff suddenly started, almost rising to his feet, putting one hand to his nose and mouth. The man exploring the cut coughed loudly, but kept working.

“Jesus save us from such an end,” the sheriff said, looking away.

Around them, the silent men drew closer, forming a ragged circle around the body and the three men bent over it. A siren’s faint peal could be heard in the distance. But the men said nothing, did not tum their heads, their tall, straight forms interspersed with the dark trunks of thin, leafless trees. The forest seemed to listen. A wood of men.

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“You goin’ over to Oswego tomorrow to try and get a job at the new Ramada Inn?”

“We’re not waiting ’til tomorrow.”

“What about the search?”

The man said nothing for a minute. Then, fidgeting at his pockets, “Hold this damn thing, would you? Want to get out a cigarette.” He thrust a foot-long white taper at the other man. After he had his cigarette lit, he looked away from the man holding two candles, saw someone he knew in the crowd, began edging away.

Two in a long procession, they had walked from the Sun’s-A-Rising store to the cinder block steps leading to the doors of North Hellespont’s Catholic church. A portable raised platform had been erected for the night on the patch of grass

before the church. Ellie and Sam looked down from the stand, points of white candlelight spread over the parking lot and road. A priest in a black cassock and white vestment stood beside them. Suzanne Richardson was near the steps, talking with some of Darleen's relatives and close friends. A man in a dark business suit moved among them, talking briefly with each one before he climbed the slatted steps to stand with Ellie and Sam and the priest.

"That's the man I told you about," someone in the crowd said. "Came in from New York City three days ago to help with the search."

"Getting paid for it, too, ain't he?"

"You be still, Lucy. Didn't Ellie and Sam have to do something after that body was found and the men from Oklahoma give up?"

The priest raised his arms and the crowd's murmur stopped. He began with a benediction, one arm raised high in the air, palm facing the onlookers. When he finished, he moved to the back of the platform as the man in the suit stepped forward.

"Friends, my new friends, Ellie and Sam and the rest of Darleen's family want to thank you for being here for this candlelight march of hope. Darleen thanks you, too. And soon she'll be here to tell you so herself."

Some cheers shot up from the crowd, but most people stood silent, shifting their feet as though impatient.

"It's been over a solid month since the search began and Ellie and Sam thought it was time to show their appreciation to you all for the work you've done. And to give special thanks to the people who have been the most faithful, the most giving of their time."

Suzanne was one of the first to go up the steps. The priest shook her hand, then pinned a silver-plated badge on her sweater, just above the bow of yellow ribbon. 'Loving friend to Darleen O'Donnell' was embossed on the keepsake. Suzanne hugged and kissed Ellie and Sam, then left the platform as another young woman was walking up. Past Easter Sunday, past the holy days when Christ appeared to his disciples and talked to them for the last times, the white circle moon looking down on the small sea of lights was closer, descended from the remoteness of winter, reaching toward the moons of July that would poise just above the forest roof.

Maynard and Jimmy were the last to go up the steps. Maynard received his badge from the priest, shook hands firmly with Sam, then took Ellie's offered hand in both of his, squeezed it gently for several seconds. When Jimmy shuffled up in front of Ellie, he stuck out his hand, then let it drop, stood waiting there, looked down at the ground with his mouth hanging open. Ellie bent over and wrapped both her arms around him. When she let go, he half-ran down the steps after Maynard, tripping at the bottom. The crowd laughed, people shouting "Atta boy, Jimmy! You done good!" A few of the men punched playfully at Maynard and Jimmy as they folded themselves back into the crowd.

When the laughter had ebbed, Ellie stepped forward. She laid her hands on the two-by-four railing in front of her. Darleen's face looked down at the crowd from her mother's T-shirt, so familiar now to everyone present that it seemed like the blue sky or the crucifix that hung in front of them as they prayed in church.

"This all started on Easter Sunday. You all know that. We never thought we'd still be in it, not now, two days past Ascension Thursday. This Sunday starts Pentecost, and here we still are. Christ is up in heaven, the Holy Ghost soon to come down in tongues of flame to his disciples." She kept her face turned skyward

as she talked, but her voice grew louder, her tone dark and angry. “And where’s my Darleen, we all wonder? She’s not home like Christ is. Where is she, God?”

Her voice broke on the last word. Sam and the priest and the man in the business suit stepped forward, but she shook her shoulders at them, wagged her head like a bulldog. She kept her eyes fixed on the sky. “This Sunday’s mass is for that poor dead girl they found last week. Sam and me want you all to be there, Catholic or no. The service at nine’ll be ecumenical. Sam and me pray every night for her now, right along with our prayers for Darleen. We pray the police will find out who she is, that she can go back to her parents and be put to rest proper. If something bad ever happened to my Darleen, or to any of your children, isn’t that what you’d all want? To know where they are resting forever?”

She tilted her head down until she faced the crowd again, then suddenly let it drop. She shook her head, the tight brown and white curls shaking at the onlookers. “But nothing that bad has happened to Darleen.” She looked up again, the color of brick, white lines carved deep at the sides of her eyes. “No, nothing that bad, not so bad as what happened to that dear girl. She hasn’t come home with Christ, but she’s still okay. We all know she’s a strong, healthy girl. Nobody could do anything terrible to her against her will. She’s too strong and she wants too much to come home. She won’t let herself be held forever.”

As she talked on, someone in the crowd coughed loudly. At the base of the platform, Suzanne Richardson walked over to the radio journalist from Syracuse. For a moment, they stood close together, looking at each other. He reached out, slowly, put his arm around her shoulders. She leaned against him, and they began to walk away from the platform. The moon burned hard upon them as they left the crowd.

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Azure ringed with pink-white, Darleen O’Donnell’s eye, stared through streaks of manure on the shattered window of a rust-chewed bus. She twisted her head and the line of vision between her eye and the moon was true, unblocked. Her eye closed against the beam. Opening again, the iris flooding with cold white light, expanding like the unfurled sea, like the night sky arching over the trees and hills and roads surrounding the caution signal flashing amber and red light over the gasoline pumps at North Hellespont’s one convenience store.

Seven or Eight

B Versions of She

eneath the statue's dead gaze, Elephant and Castle pulses with traffic. Five lanes speeding around a concrete dead-zone. Red double-decker walls fly past, separated from women pushing prams on the sidewalk by a few inches and flimsy steel fencing. A bilevel shopping mall, pink walls covered in grime, hangs on the roundabout's outer rim. Local vendors crowd the sidewalk with second-hand clothing and wilted plants. Facing the traffic treadmill, reaching above the noisy commercial jumble, the giant elephant stands guard. on his back legs, ears outspread, Dumbo poised for flight, front legs pawing at the sky, smog-stained tusks piercing a leaden sky.

Downpour-dodging, Randall took shelter beneath the pink elephant. Standing between the statue's rear legs, he looked up, wondered. Like every oddity in London, the suburb's name, "Elephant and Castle," must have some historical explanation. He groped through his memory for a snippet of information about an eastern monarch who sent ten elephants to London for a coronation in the Nineteenth Century. Wait—was he confusing that with the King of Siam's offer to send pachyderms to Abraham Lincoln for fighting the Civil War?

Randall cursed his defective memory, then swore again at his wasted day in the British Museum. Eight hours of sorting through directors' diaries, correspondence between early film producers, fragments of scripts for movies never made. Another full day, another blank in the research for his book. Getting soaked seemed trivial in comparison, so he opened his cheap umbrella and began the long walk down New Kent Road.

On most evenings, drunks and other wastrels staggered up to him. "Changeguv?" they would slur in a single oiled syllable. But this evening the sidewalk was empty. Relieved, he slowed his pace when he reached a row of abandoned houses. Behind an iron fence crusted with green mold, skeletal tenement frames hulked against the grey horizon. Post-Blitz structures thrown up to last ten years, windows smashed, doors boarded. But a soft yellow light burned in a window on the third floor. As he watched, wondering, it winked out. Squatters? C3ould even they take refuge in a slum so decayed?

Get home, he thought. Home to the dinner included in his room and board. Lascoll House lay two blocks ahead. Six stories of incandescent light blazing through ruined neo-Gothic grandeur. Flying porticos, cut stonework, a Dickensian chimney roofworld. Two weeks earlier, a balmy February Sunday, he had walked into Lascoll House for the first time. Heat and humidity bled odors from the moldy

draperies and pummeled oriental carpets. The scent of mildew blended with steamed fish and boiled beef rising from the basement kitchen. Randall had dropped his bags, aghast. Impoverished aristocracy came to mind, Moscow mansions converted to slums after the revolution. Telling himself the place had character, he heard the door open behind him. Suddenly, a crowd of bearded Muslims in black silk robes milled past him. With their smart leather luggage, they carried gnarled wooden staffs. From an office at one side of the foyer, an aged man in a dark suit and round-brimmed hat emerged. Laughter and hand-shaking, the old man wading through a forest of conical scarlet caps. Welcome! shouted the old man. Joyous Ramadan, friends!

Cowed by the panoply, Randall tried to remember the event that Ramadan commemorates. Did the word mean "the hot month" or "the cold?" *What an entrance*, he thought jealously, sulking behind a potted elephant's ear.

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You've all read so much bloated theory on race and culture that a simple empirical observation might surprise you. Let's think about the representation of race in the early Hollywood period. Take the first American adaptation of *Dracula*, the Universal version that most people take to be the equal of *Frankenstein*, but which in fact is relentlessly uncinematic. The Mina character in that film, Helen Chandler, appears so ghostily anemic that the count's lust for her seems wildly misconceived. Look at her in this slide . . . ah, there she is. Far from juicy, she looks more cadaverous than the vampire sisters (wives?) whom Drac abandons for the pulsing vitality of western European capitalism. Yet, he sets his cape on wan little Mina. Look at her. You can hardly tell where that white, gauzy dress stops and her skin begins. What if we assume that the (good) heroine's exaggerated whiteness has the effect of making us read the (bad) vampire as being black, metaphorically? Keep in mind that the count's menace is not a simple matter of sucking blood. He also repels and attracts through his identity as a foreigner, his kinship with the Orient of Europe. Those Balkan lands of curses, gypsies, gnarled trees with thorns like knives. Look up the etymology of "gypsy," by the way. So, is it too much of a stretch to think that the heroine's coloring makes the count's ashen skin seem like a mask, a concealment of the exotic and dark, of the nearest counterpart to black savagery to be found among Caucasian folk?

And not to change the subject completely, but, in our next slide . . . King Kong! The big monkey's love interest, Anne, is played by Fay Wray, of course, the screen's first scream-queen, the pathetic waifette whom a big-shot director plucks off the street and whisks away to Skull Island. As you can see in this slide, Wray out-whites even Chandler's Mina. Does anyone remember the shipboard scene where the director puts Anne through a screen test? Gussied up in a pure white gown (natch), Anne must pretend she sees something terrifying. "You're only hope is if you can scream!" Robert Armstrong hollers at her like a maniac. "Scream, Anne, scream!" These next few slides show the tightening close-up in incremental stills. See what I mean about her whiteness? When she finally lets loose with that famous shriek, her mouth looks like a gopher hole in a snow-field. We'll let the vaginal symbolism lie for the moment, but look at this still of Wray in profile here, talking to the hunky hero. Her hair and face and chest are nothing but a blur; her profile virtually dissolves into the white background. She's so white/virtuous that she's incorporeal.

Interesting as this may be, though, it's all just a preface to today's real topic. You can turn up the lights now.

Take the most beautiful woman who's ever lived, a self-promoted African (but not black) queen who, barring bad beauty judgments, happens to be immortal. Take an (almost) equally gorgeous male, a bone-headed Brit, a golden, virginal Oxoniensis—that means Oxfordite, but, hell, you all should know that. He has the august name of "Leo Vincey"—the surname is related to Latin "vincere," meaning "conquer," but he never behaves very lionlike or victorious. Anyway, this torpid Leo turns out to be the reincarnation of a defrocked Egyptian high priest. The very priest, in fact, who steered our white African queen on her road to immortality. Put these white folk against a backdrop of ignorant African natives just a-busting for rebellion against the queen, who apparently has not been studying diplomacy all these years. These natives, the "Amahagger"—one could argue, I think, for a pun on "I'm a nigger"—are very dark, in the film versions, but in the novel they're described as the yellowish result of miscegenation between Persian colonists and the degenerate survivors of an extinct but once-noble (and white!) African civilization called Kôr. Now take a subterranean cave with a bottomless abyss. This chasm can only be traversed by walking across a vibrating spur of rock that might as well have "castration anxiety" spray-painted on it in day-glo pink. And if all of that's not enough, throw in a comet that passes earth only once every several hundred years. When its light reaches a subterranean chamber, it ignites a fountain of cold flame that imparts eternal youth to anyone who has the courage to enter and bathe therein. Just don't try a second dip.

They don't write them like this anymore. Adventure novels in the grand tradition are gone forever. But when Sir H. R. Haggard wrote *She*, colonized Africa, leeched upon by every European nation with enough cash to send off some ships, was ripe for exploitation of the literary type. By this time, the white west had a huge literate middle class, readers fairly salivating for stories set on that big, black, primal continent. Think of shop clerks and factory workers goggle-eyed with visions of white men running amok, screwing their way through hordes of dusky black women. But don't get me going on a Marxist analysis of entertainment consumption. We have trendier goals today.

With raw materials like those packed into *She*, you would think Hollywood couldn't go wrong. Only a moron could ruin this property, right? With a little luck, even a cheapie studio could make this novel into an epic on the *Lawrence of Arabia* or *Cleopatra* scale. Well, you'd be wrong. As epics go, both adaptations of *She* are very thin gruel. First came the 1934 version from RKO-Radio—smallest and cheapest of the major studios—starring Helen Gahagan in (I think) her only film role. Does that name ring a bell for anyone a bit older than I? Yes, the future Helen Gahagan Douglas, the beauty queen/opera singer who became a politician, the very woman whom Richard Nixon smeared with his famous quip that her politics were as red as her panties. Well, when Gahagan sweeps on screen for the first time—oh, down with the lights again, please. What a sight. Imagine her in the Halls of Congress! Obviously, she's inhumanly white, her hair peroxided and swept up like the bride of Frankenstein's. Perhaps some producer saw Douglas's death-white skin and platinum hair as appropriate to the narrative's location. And why would this be appropriate, you ask? Because some lunatic switched the location of She's kingdom from Africa to—yes, I'm serious!—the North Pole. Perhaps, though, something other than stupidity was at work here, because the film was directed by Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, the very pair who had made King Kong

only one year earlier. Do you think that maybe the Kong's success tempted them to indulge their whiteness obsession even further? No, no, hang onto your questions for a few minutes. I'll tell you later how they rationalized the African natives dancing around bonfires in caves beneath the ice fields.

Unfortunately, 1934 was not a good time in America for camp, intentional or otherwise. I don't know how much money RKO lost on the Gahagan fiasco, but thirty-one years passed before any producer picked up Haggard's novel again. In 1965, Hammer made a big budget extravaganza from the novel, painted stem-to-stern with that studio's trademark lush coloring. Ursula Andress's hair—there she comes now—is a flaming reddish gold, perfectly matched in one scene by a mile-long feathered robe and headdress. And you can't deny that Andress, unlike Chandler, Wray, and Douglas, looks fairly robust, if only because of her majestic bustline. The natives, of course, are still black as jet. It's too bad that the director affected a stately, fatalistic ambience, because this makes the movie look posed and stilted. Andress works hard, though, revolving her way through more gowns and crowns than she does facial expressions, huge white bosom always a-heaving with fury or lust. But all of the changes made in the novel (none involving the North Pole) were bad calls.

So now you're probably wondering why no one has tried again. The dumb-ass natives could be given an upgrade, right? Beef up a few parts for black actors who have box office weight? Maybe have a non-light-skinned black actress play Ustane, the Amahagger woman who falls in love with Leo and eventually gets blasted by She? Or maybe even make She herself black? What a notion! But before we anticipate the future, we need to consider the film versions that preceded the Gahagan movie. I know I said that RKO's version was the first, but I meant the first sound version. Before 1934—long before, in fact—America and England had churned out a quantity of silent adaptations. Strange to think, isn't it, that something compelled the early film industry to adapt this one novel to the screen seven times in fewer than fifteen years? Haggard himself even wrote the title cards for one of them. Turn up the lights again, would you?

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In a sandwich shop on Great Russell Street, staring through dirty windows at the grey rain, Randall said to himself *You are now a thief. You cannot come out of this clean, only a lighter degree of sordid.* He sat still for several minutes, looking at his food, finally picked up a pen and opened a notebook. In his best penmanship, he wrote "Made an interesting find today while looking through a collection of shooting scripts. Might lead to something. But there would be consequences." He had found it while browsing a folio containing the unpublished papers of Branshaw Tellyragh, the director of the seventh and final silent version of *She*. When he touched a sheet of stationery pasted to a quarto page, one corner came loose, and something fell from behind it. Randall stared at the thin strip of paper in his lap, looked up, around, and down again. After reading it once, without turning his head or looking up, he slipped it into his shirt pocket. When he had his briefcase checked at the exit to the Manuscripts Room, he expected alarms to blast. Walking through the lobby, up the stairs, and across the Oriental galleries, he broke into a sweat, expecting guards to apprehend him. Now he drew the letter from a front pocket, unfolded it, brushed some crumbs aside and spread it out. He

was surprised that the letter still read the same. *Luck like this just doesn't strike often. Not me.*

> As I feared, blasted Harold Tarnsower has informed Sir Henry that some company other than mine is also filming his Egyptian novel. I cannot explain why Sir Henry even talks to Tarnsower, after the botch he made of his own filming of the novel six years ago. But they both belong to the same club and that explains much about men of their class. The old man was quite incensed, railing at me over the telephone about the endless pirating of what he always calls his "African romances." I should never have told Tarnsower about this upstart company, not given his feelings about the Africans in England.
>
> I calmed Sir Henry somewhat, telling him we hardly need worry about a movie made by a group of amateur Negroes. And he was eager to hear that my film is nearly complete, even though Miss Dialgihev has been ill and we have had to shoot around her for five days. Jameson's ideas for filming the queen's death in the pillar of flame are most ingenious. Nearly all the stunt effects, I think, can be done in the camera. I feel fortunate to have Jameson with me, even if some of my workers object to giving such an important position to an uneducated Negro.

It was obviously genuine. The vertical handwriting perfectly matched that of Tellyragh's other papers. Fragments of his version of Haggard's novel were preserved at the British Film Archives, about twenty minutes of footage from an original three-reel feature. Tellyragh's film, although later, had been lost completely. But another film, an unknown eighth silent version of *She* contemporaneous with Tellyragh's? A movie made by "a group of negroes?" Did England have any black film-makers in 1912, when Tellyragh shot his film? Had Tarnsower been, even for that time, a vocal racist? Could the purloined letter make his filmography of *She* into the book he noted for promotion to professor? Something people outside academia would buy?

Carefully, he folded the letter, replaced it in the flimsy envelope, and put it away. He doubted he could find more evidence of a lost eighth version, but the process of detection might be interesting. He picked up his pen again, pulled the notebook to him, wrote another few words, then looked at them: "Consequences not as strong a deterrent as previously thought."

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After breakfast at Lascoll House one morning, he put on his best jacket and trousers, his only white shirt. Then all ten fingers fidgeted with a bowtie. *Billions of people in the world and only a handful know how wretched these things are to fix, he thought. A fact that gives one pause. You need fingers two feet long to stuff the bow through that damned loop, and if it's not tight enough to begin with, you can't take up the slack later. But what else gives me that pencil-necked-geek look that I've cultivated so well?* When another attempt failed, he swore aloud and jumped up and down, one end of tie clamped between his front teeth. Finally he settled for a bow with an off-center knot and a long sag on the right.

Walking down three flights of stairs, his mood changed with every new carpet pattern. *This book is doomed, he thought on the third floor. I'll be trounced by academia and by the tens of adoring fans who read my first two books and my one horror story*. Reaching the second floor, he scanned the halls, found them pilgrim-free. *Then again, this book might be a bullet. Maybe even go into paperback. Routledge will buy any piece of tripe with race, culture, and sexuality*. Beginning his final descent down the grand curved staircase, his confidence became giddy. *I wonder if dukes and dukettes trodded this staircase before me? I'd sing a song from a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, but I don't know one.*

Anne, the heir-apparent to Lascoll House, was working in the lobby office, her Doberman Pinscher sleeping on a couch in the corner. When Randall stuck his head over the counter, the dog bounded toward him, barking and gnashing her teeth. "Nice doggie," he said, backing away. "Have you got a good grip on her, Anne?"

"She's usually very gentle. You're the only guest who's ever bothered her this way. Shut the bloody hell up, Gudrun!" she yelled. "Hang on a bit, the mail's not been sorted yet." She picked up a stack, began flipping through envelopes. "No, nothing for you." She threw the bundle on the dog's couch. "Did you give your address here to anyone in the States?"

"No one who cares to use it, apparently." As he turned to leave, he remembered something. "You know, Anne, the other night I saw a light burning in one of the tenements, the one closest to the hotel. Could someone be living there, do you think?"

"Damnable squatters," taking a long drag from a cigarette. "The police rousted out a group of them a few months back, but they always return. Did you see if—"

He saw the Muslim celebrants at the top of the grand sweep, heard them laughing. "Got to run now, Anne," he called, hustling into the drizzle, wishing he had called a cab.

A fresh downpour erupted as he emerged from Tower tube station and headed for Pall Mall. One block from the station, a gust of wind gutted his umbrella. Feet soaked, odorous, he took a seat on a burgundy leather sofa. "Thanks so much for agreeing to see me," he said. "I'm sure you must be busy."

"Nonsense. We don't get inquiries like yours every day, Mr. Traner. You piqued my curiosity." The man wore a pin-stripe suit with a flowered silk tie and matching pocket square. "American, aren't you? Cigarette? Been to any exceptional clubs in London yet? How did you trace Reciprocity to us?"

Randall thought a second. Then, mock-methodically: "Yes. God-Almighty-yes, but I quit. Not really. And, fourth, it wasn't difficult."

After a blank moment, the man's face broke apart. "Oh, in order, I get it!" He tilted back in his chair. "I love an American sense of humor!" Finished laughing, he rocked forward in his chair, put his elbows on his desk, and stared hard at Randall. "Now, really, exactly what do you want? Are you writing a book? Did the BFI send you here?"

"In reverse order this time," Randall answered. "No, yes, and I'll be happy to tell you."

The man brayed again, then lunged across his desk for a cigarette lighter in the shape of a £ symbol. "Sure you won't have one? No? All right, let's get down to business, whatever the hell you said your name was. This better be good, and if

those Labor Party culture vulture BFI communist bastards are behind this you'll find out that—"

"Please," raising his hand, "let me to tell you how I found your firm, Mr. Signet. Purely by accident, while I was browsing at MOMI, the Museum of the Moving Image, I came across a still from a silent version of H. Rider Haggard's *She*, the version made by Reciprocity, which was owned by Harold Tarnsower. You know MOMI, I assume? On the South Bank, by the National Film Theater?"

The man nodded, smoking. "Tourist trap," he hissed. "Never've gone there, myself."

"Probably. But the still caught my attention, because I knew it wasn't taken from the extant footage of the Reciprocity version. I had already viewed those clips, at the British Film Archives."

"So what?" He sounded impatient. "The MOMI people took the still from . . ." He waved a hand. "From an old poster or something."

"Not very likely, I don't think. No one at MOMI could tell me anything about the source, but it seems possible that the original still is something that the British Film Archives never found. Perhaps even some additional footage has survived somewhere."

"Maybe so. But just what do you want from my firm, Mr. Traner? You already seem to know much more than I do about Sir Harry's film."

What do I want? I don't even know if this book has an argument, so how am I supposed to know how to scavenge through decaying reels of film? "When Tarnsower quit directing and founded your investment firm, he became a collector of film memorabilia, even at that early date. I hoped you might know something about his collection, Mr. Signet. Maybe the still I saw at MOMI indicates that Tarnsower saved more of his version of *She* than people know about. So I would like to know if his collection was sold. Or does it remain in his family, maybe?"

Mr. Signet leaned back in his chair. After several minutes of contemplation, he rose, walked around the desk, and sat on the leather sofa close to Randall. "I shouldn't tell you this," his voice hushed through compressed lips. "But I like your . . . bowtie. Such nuisances to knot properly, aren't they? My firm still owns Sir Harry's collection that you seek so earnestly, Mr. Traner. It's never been catalogued or indexed, except for insurance purposes. After Sir Harry died seven years ago, we moved the collection to an air-conditioned vault in a warehouse in Richmond. I have a key." A conspiratorial wink, then he lowered his voice even more. "But unfortunately for you, Mr. Traner, Sir Harry put a peculiar clause in his will. No one is allowed to use the film materials until certain people are all dead. Several people named in his will.

Randall waited for more, but the man sat smiling at him, yellowish teeth showing behind thin lips. "Someone Harold Tarnsower knew is still alive?" Randall asked. "He must be nearly one hundred years old. Or she."

"Mr. Traner," leaning close to Randall's face, "I'd like very much to show you an interesting gentlemen's club tonight. A very British institution. Not a tourist trap for the Yanks and the Japs." He reached out one hand, lifted the sagging side of Randall's tie. "Perhaps a tiny exception to Sir Harry's restrictions could be made. As I said, I have a key."

Randall twitched. *Eek! Unhand my bow, sir!* As the man waited, Randall coughed, edged away across the leather. Silence fell, until Randall finally whispered: "Why all the secrecy?"

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Take me back to the metaphysicals, Randall thought. Shining his flashlight beam on each step before moving forward, he picked his way up the rotting stairs. The man had only appeared at the window for a moment in pallid light before he disappeared. But Randall knew who he was. The same black man who had begged from him several times, sometimes in the underground pedestrian tunnels around Elephant and Castle, sometimes on New Kent Road.

"I'm quite sure he's dead, sir." The woman at the British Film Archives had been stern, professional. "When I first began working here, he would show up from time to time, asking to see some old footage. He never had money for the fee, but we accommodated him when we could. Back then, everybody on the staff wanted to ask him questions about the early days. Some of us even helped him get into rehab programs for alcoholism, but he always went back on the bottle."

"But I have seen this man," Randall told her. "He's alive. He panhandles near my hotel in Elephant and Castle. It must be the same man."

"If he were alive now, sir, he'd be nearly one hundred." The woman sounded pestered. "And he was in bad health fifteen years ago. How did you say you got his name, anyway?"

Later, when Randall had used the old key, after he flipped on a row of spitting incandescent bulbs and saw the trash heap that filled the entire room, he almost gave up before looking through the debris. Books and albums thrown everywhere, battered film cans, heaps of yellowed photographs, busted wooden chairs and cartons filled with nothing but dust. He would destroy something, he worried, if he began rummaging around blindly. *Not to mention contracting some fungal disease. How can it be that no one has catalogued all this, to hell with storing it properly.* But after wandering among the shelves and tables for a few minutes, he found the photograph. Keeping it beside him as he read through Harold Tarnsower's diary for an hour, glancing up at it as he turned pages, pieces began to fall into place. And after he finished with the diary, he stumbled across the film can.

"Tell me the name of the last man on Sir Harry's list, Stanley. The one who's still alive. There's only one, right?" In the empty tube station at Baker Street, Randall had tried to make his voice casual.

"Oh, Mr. Traner, I couldn't possibly." Mr. Signet had laughed. The Randall had taken the invitation for a drink. The pub had been borderline squalid.

"I need to know," Randall insisted. "In the warehouse today, I found a photograph of Tarnsower and Tellyragh with two black men. And suddenly I need to know the name of the last man on your list."

"Oh, how can anything for some professor's book be so important?" He looked down the tracks. "Really, I wish you'd stop talking about your bloody—"

When Randall shoved him against the curved brick wall of the tube station, Signet gasped, then smiled uncertainly. But when Randall's hands gripped his throat, the smile died.

"Is it Jankinn?" Randall shouted. "Rudolph Jankinn? Tell me!" Signet sputtered and coughed, twisting his head. Then he nodded, eyes blurred and wide.

Randall had let him go, I'm afraid that academic books can be serious in more than one way, Mr. Signet." Walking away, he had called over his shoulder: "And I'm no one's 'Randy.'"

He stood in the storage vault now, wiping dust from the can, beginning to twist the steel platter top. *Don't be dissolved entirely. Don't.* But the film looked almost new. Perhaps it had been used only a few times. Randall unreeled about a foot of film, then more, until he saw a frame with writing. He shone the flashlight from behind the silver nitrate. He peered closely, he squinted, he forced his eyes to be stronger than they were. A pause, then he dropped the ribbon on the junk.

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When he reached the hallway at the top of the stairs, he edged past broken chairs and mounds of trash. At the far end, a light burned through an open doorway. Randall found Jankinn lying on a mattress in the corner. When he stepped into the room, the man shifted his bulk, fixed a gaze on Randall through the dim light. "You here to kick me out?" he asked slowly. But when Randall began to explain himself, the man slowly heaved himself up, then fell into a chair, sighing.

"And after I found the photograph, I found this," Randall concluded. He took a pair of tweezers from his pocket, opened the small film can. "Do you know what it is?" He plucked the short strip of silver nitrate from the can, held it dangling by one end.

The man sniffed. "You think I got a movieola around here to look at that with? Looks old, though. Don't even got power in here. What is that, about five minutes running time? Hey, you got a cigarette for me?"

"Cartons full," Randall said, "but first let me describe to you what's on the film. Can you hear me all right?"

He nodded. "Ain't too deaf, guv," his eyes glancing between Randall and the film. "Let's hear."

When Randall was finished telling him about the film, the candle in the window had burned down to the sill. Randall caught his breath, suddenly aware again of where he was. Jankinn reached out a shaky hand, closed it around Randall's wrist. At the touch of his scabrous, rugged skin, Randall winced. "Where'd you get that there footage, sir?" He coughed out the words, wiped his lips with his sleeve.

"It's a long story, Mr. Jankinn. Please, do you know anything about it?"

A long pause. He licked his lips. "Anything? Hell, I know everything about it. My own father made it, the same time that some other company, a white company, was doing the same book into a film. My father's brother worked on that crew."

"Your uncle?" Randall asked. "Was his name Jameson?"

"Jimmy we called him. He thought Jameson Jankinn sounded snobbish. He was working for my daddy, too, but his white boss didn't know about it. That man's name was . . . hell, what was it now?" He stared off into space, lost.

"Branshaw Tellyragh?"

"That's it, all right. You got another snobbish name there. Damn nice man, though." He jerked his head up, looking at the film strip again. "Hey, how'd Tarnsower get a copy of daddy's film, anyway? Or what's left of it?"

"What else?" Randall coaxed. "What else do you remember?"

"Like I said, I remember everything else. That's me in the film, ain't it?"

"You're in it?" Randall said. "Did you play a native?"

"A native, yes. And the hero, too, in my daddy's version. Man, my uncle and my dad would laugh and laugh, just thinking what the guy who wrote the book would say about that."

The hero, Randall thought. The black hero. A vision of his book's dust jacket flashed through his mind. Laughing, he dropped to the floor next to Jankinn's chair.

"You okay, son?" In the dying candlelight, the man regarded him cautiously.

"Never better, Mr. Jankinn," Randall finally managed. "Let's get you out of here. I think you need a change of location before we start talking."

"How about those cigarettes?" He glared, truculent.

"Sir, I'm afraid that I lied about the cigarettes. You have smoked your last. And drunk your last drop of alcohol, by the way. You are now on the Randall Traner fitness and longevity program. Our first stop is a health center where you get checked out every way from Sunday. Then I take you to the best hotel either one of us has ever stayed in. And *then* you start telling me everything that you know about your father's version of *She*. And about his 'negro' company."

"Pardon me for saying it, sir." Jankinn drew himself up from the chair, walked to the window and blew out the candle. "But if you think anybody today would give a good damn about a black film made from that old book, you're the one needs a fitness program."

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As you know, the Hammer production of *She* (1965) ends with Ayeesha (She) and Leo, her reincarnated true love, the man whose return She has awaited for centuries, alone at last in the subterranean cavern visited once a millennium by a comet. To assure Leo that the fire sparked by the comet bestows immortality, She walks into the flame. A long, high shot of the chamber interior, the column of green flame roiling between the lovers. The pillar of fire opens. Enter She. A panning shot of her body as the flames was over her thin white gown. A close-up of She's face, smiling with sensuous satisfaction. But slowly the smile falters. She lifts her hands, sees that they are veined and gnarled. Raising her arms to Leo, entreating him, She exposes her face. A series of dissolves finally culminates in a close-up: the ravaged visage of an ancient crone. Leo recoils. As She looks down at her body, perceiving her disastrous error, her long blonde hair falls in a pile at her feet. "Oh, horror!" she cries.

But what you don't know is how the story ends in the eighth silent version of the novel. This is from the reconstructed shooting script for *A Romance of Old Africa*, directed by William Jankinn for Juli Imperial Players in 1912.

> As She begins to enter the pillar of flame, Ymbsloppogas races down the stone steps into the cavern. Shoving Leo aside, he pulls She back from the flame.
>
> Dialogue Intertitle: "Stop, O Queen! To bathe again in the star's fire is to die in agony!"
>
> Leo pulls Ymbsloppogas away from She. The two men wrestle each other to the ground. Finally, Ymbsloppogas pulls his knife, stabs Leo through the heart.
>
> Dialogue Intertitle: "Die, English dog! Leave our Queen for Ymbsloppogas and her people!"

Rising, he faces her. They embrace. Close-up of She's face.

Dialogue Intertitle: "Now I know it is you I have always loved, brave warrior! My centuries of waiting end at last!"

Tinted bright green, the comet swells in a jagged gap in the rock. The camera slowly pulls back. Below, Leo lies dead, the fair skin of his naked chest spattered with blood. As the camera recedes further, darkness clouds the edges of the frame. Far below, in an iris shot, Ymbsloppogas enters the fire while She watches. As the white flames play over his black skin, She raises her ebony arms, laughing, waiting for him to emerge, immortal.

An Octopus Vase

w

hen she said “e-l-e,” he paused. *Eel? Ellie?* Then he remembered. The movie that somehow had been mentioned and made their arguing worse.

“What I said, yes, was ‘e’-‘l’-‘e.’” She stamped out each letter. “Epsilon lambda epsilon, you know, you fool. You do Greek. But I said it didn't have the same meaning as in the movie.”

“It was ‘Extinction Level Event’ right?” he asked her. “I remember. It had a comet.” He leaned his head near hers, closed the distance between them in the bed, finally put a hand on her leg.

She pushed his arm away, stepped out of the bed, pulled on a nightgown over her slip as she walked across the room. “Congratulations on catching up.”

“For God’s sake, don’t smoke,” he said, settling on his back, pulling up the sheet.

“A meteor, stupid, it was a meteor. Comets don’t work that way. You know I haven’t smoked in months. This Godless mess won’t get me started again.” She went into the bathroom, left the light off, sat on a stepstool in the corner.

“Don’t sit there in the dark. Come back to bed.”

She half-rose, but then down again, hard. Somehow, when she hit the seat, she broke at the waist, lifted her hands up to her face, kicked the door shut. She wanted to go back to bed, to feel his strong legs next to hers. But anything sensuous seemed forbidden.

“Don’t cry alone in there,” he called.

Snapping up her head, shouting at the door: “You always hate it when I cry. What could be the difference now? I’m not crying.”

He opened the door, standing in the frame, the room’s low light a blurry outline around his body. He was a wall. His chest was brick. The light lit his shoulders as a river’s cold water washes over round stones. He was new to her.

“Do put some clothes on. And not just a towel.”

He took a robe from a hook on the door, pulled it around him, got down to his knees before her. “How can you care about the funeral now? After what they decided, your fucking church doesn’t deserve your brother.”

He lifted his arm in time to ward off her open hand shooting toward his face. With his free hand, he gripped her wrist. A few seconds of struggle, she desisted. Her wrist free, she went from the stool to the floor, her white robe spreading like a chrysanthemum against the blue floor.

“Don’t ever say that again.” She wiped at her eyes.

“I’ve heard you lay an ‘f” or two on the church.”

She raised herself up on one arm, pushed back her hair, gathered the cotton flower around her. “It comes with membership,” she laughed.

He sat down next to her, cross-legged. She leaned against him, her hand coming down in the dark triangle where the robe parted on his thighs.

“You just can’t know,” she said. “I can’t bear it. They can’t deny him this. Tomorrow, my sister and I will find out what to do. The hierarchy is Byzantine enough so that someone who can get permission must be hidden away somewhere.” She continued talking about the next step, the right answer, a shovel for a narrow grave in a churchyard.

“Byzantine is an odd word for it, since much of it truly is Byzantine.” And he tried to laugh. But then: “I think you should stop,” he whispered. “Anything you do might take years. Think about your sister.”

“I’m doing this for her as much as for him.”

“She agrees with the church. She believes your brother deserves denial.”

She rose to her feet, began to pull him back to bed. “My sister doesn’t really believe that. It's monstrous. She was upset.”

The bedclothes shifted and rustled around them. She wanted him close, but denied it. Without words, the light off, they wrestled an adjacency that pleased neither.

“Wait,” he mumbled. What about the Extinction-Level Event thing? I don’t get it.”

“You are stupid, but so was the whole damn thing.” She pulled further from him, but raised herself on one elbow and looked back at him. He seemed like a forbidden terrain in the bed. “I meant—I guess I meant—not *Extinction*-Level, but —”

“You're right, I was dense,” he said. “Excommunication-level event.” Then, after a minute: “I think it would be eta, not epsilon. Eta lambda eta.”

“You should know,” she muttered, dropping her head on the pillow. “Why the hell would an atheist learn Greek?”

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Earlier that day, the sisters had left the diocesan house, pierced on the steps by a freezing rain.

“I cannot believe this travesty. They would bury one of us sinners fast enough. The only one of us who comes close to deserving it gets this wretched medieval banishment.” She yanked open her handbag, began fishing the contents.

“Older than that,” said the other. “Don’t smoke.”

“I’ll smoke if I want. This is a nightmare that comes once in a lifetime. It’s epochal. It’s the first event in the church’s spiral into oblivion.”

“So smoke. But don’t say absurd things about what we believe in.” She turned and walked away, slipping hard on the glazed cement, but recovering.

“Be careful, for God's sakes. And the car is in the other direction, stupid. Turn around.”

But the cold blue space felt good as the younger sister walked away. Her brother would forgive her, even if he had always told her to love their oldest sister despite her ways.

“Will you please, please stop?” The two women stood paces from each other, as though staging a duel.

The black fur coat of one was voluminous, absorbing the other's sensible red wool. “I don’t want to be alone,” one said. The other nodded. They walked toward each other.

“What I remember most is how he lectured us in there about Fitzgerald. Does he think we should be hopeful because Fitzgerald’s body was finally exhumed and moved and given Catholic rites, after they finally stopped saying that dying from alcoholism is suicide? That should comfort us? And Piaf being given a Catholic mass for the dead fifty years after she died? And the erudite Father was just flat wrong about that gay poet who walked into a carriage on Fire Island. I know that guy never said he was gay. Or that he intended suicide.”

The big fur sleeves that hung below the waist came up around the other’s narrow shoulders. “We must figure out another way,” she whispered into her sister’s hair. I want him in the right place. You will laugh, you won’t believe I can think this way, but I want him with us. And mom and father. And the other family members that are in the same place. I want it because—for the reason that—”

“I think I know. I’m not laughing. For the resurrection of the dead. I know that the idea is never far from you.”

“It's in the creed, in the creed.” She brought her long furry sleeves down from her sister, began looking for a handkerchief. In the late blue light of afternoon in the worst of winter, a transparent drop welled on the end of her nose. “‘A quattuor ventis veni spiritus . . .’ she recited slowly. ‘. . . et insufla super interfectos istos et revivescant.’ It’s the only quote I remember in Latin.”

“You know a dozen prayers in Latin,” the other sister mused, then: “Something like ‘From four winds a spirit—a wind— came—had come—and . . . all the dead people.’ Is that close? ‘Insulfa’ is a stumper.”

“Plenty close enough. Good for you. But you should have spotted ‘revivescant.’ It’s practically the same in English. But in the Bible it means ‘brought them back to life.’ The spirit did it, that is. An oddity, for sure but it got into the creed. And if I think about it a lot, it's because . . . when I first realized it was literal, it kept me in our faith.” A short pause. They searched each other’s faces.

“It's good of you not to laugh.”

“But why did it impress you like that?”

She gave a good nasal snort, squared up, fixed a stern look on the red wool. “Isn’t it obvious? What tenet has more intrinsic hilarity?”

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The arms of an octopus flowed around the spherical vase as though they could reach beyond the queen’s megaeron, through the polythera, the doors comprising the walls, far across the palace grounds, across the colonnade, weave their way through the columns that tapered at the bottom, prism-shaped. Soon, Thera would explode, then the northern invaders, then, in mere years, the extinction of the palace culture. The purple of the octopus, the blue of dolphins painted on the walls: they would die with the palaces, their colors made from a crushed crustacean that the volcanic eruption and the Mycenaean wars would kill forever. Against those shades, all colors now seem empty.

But ten days before the cold night when the sisters cried for so long on the sidewalk that the black fur eventually wrapped them both, he had thought of the zenith, not the nadir, of the civilization strung like sapphires across Crete, Rhodes,

Tiryns, Thera: jewels set in rings of craggy rock. On his third visit to Knossos, his first without a sister, the brilliance of the bracelet told him he had changed. He stood on a cliff above the Aegean, his bare legs twitching with some tension from the water. The purple octopus from before the Romans, before the Greeks, before the Mycenaeans, found its way to him.

I believe in the resurrection of the body, that the reanimation of corpses in Ezekiel 37 prefigures our rising up in our bodies. He stepped closer to the edge, clutching at the rocks with his bare feet, like a taloned bird of prey. The sea was still that night, the winds calm.

The Stillness Caused by Trains

Years later, his father's parents long dead, he stood on the same bridge, watching the same river. *The creek* everyone had called it back then. That was before the side-porch was screened in, before the chickens were sold or killed, their trim yellow coop dragged away behind a farmer's tractor. The whitewashed pump still cranked water into a washtub. Green glass soda bottles and striped watermelons bobbed like toy seabeasts. Picnic and card tables clustered near the house. As the day progressed, they multiplied across the lawns, spreading in a landscape of hamburgers and cold salads, red Jello islands. Old people, unknown names, wiry country folk. Aged, shadowy, the siblings and friends of his grandparents. For their bones, comfortable chairs were carried from the house, footstools and lap rugs. He would watch from a distance, study their faces, the wooden canes, straw hats, a high-backed wicker wheelchair. One Sunday a woman appeared with an ear trumpet that curled from her head like a long-throated flower. Sometimes his father would pluck him from a game of kickball or badminton and make him stand before a smiling couple. Sweaty, red-faced, afraid of their benevolent gaze, wanting to run. *This is my boy* his father would say. Or *This is my son.* Or *This is the youngest, the only boy.* But no, he corrected himself, staring at the river. Not those words, not a description that exact from his father.

He walked down the road from the first bridge, part of his grandparents' property, to the second. Abandoned, wild with red sumac, an old mill sat lost, dead with boarded-window silence. In the days of family picnics, a stroll to the farther bridge had been a treat, an adventure. The restless children would recruit an adult for the trip, usually Uncle Guy. Unmarried, childless. An adult but still living at home with his parents, working the railroad with his father. He was every kid's favorite uncle, the leader of games, arbitrator of disputes. In the fall, he would take them to the far bridge to visit the mill, drink cider that the owner drew from casks with wooden spigots.

Coming to the old house that day, the first time in fifteen years or more, he had waited for his father to ask him how he felt or to reproach him for the long absence. But his father, still tall in his seventies, stiff behind the wheel of his old Mercedes, spoke instead of the house, of repairs it needed, about the new dead end. The rupture between him and his three children was something he never discussed. Not with anyone, Ed was sure. They broke away one after the other. Ginnie first, the oldest, then the middle child, Nance, a few years later. And finally

he, the only son, Ed, the last to go. As if leaving behind the father's clan were some rite of passage that none of them could escape.

Today, the distance between the two bridges seemed barely twenty strides. Coming to the pavement's end, he saw that the road had been closed off on the bridge's far side. A fallen tree slanted across the road. A trash can lid was nailed to the peeling trunk. In sloppy letters, black-painted: "No Outlet." Closing the bridge had diverted the flow of water. In the high seasons, when he was a boy, the river had been a torrent, white-falling ten feet down rocks beneath the mill's overhang. Now not a ripple broke the silence, only insect drone. Prisoners' fingers, grass spikes poked through the bridge floor of metal gridwork. He knelt down to pull loose a piece of grass. The road itself had narrowed, scrubby trees growing inward from both sides. Severed from the county route that ran to Port Blake, his grandparents' road connected only a half-dozen homes. The town supervisor wanted to stop plowing the old road in the coming winter, said that the last residents could pool their money for a contractor. But his Aunt Lucille felt bad for her neighbors that spring when she opened her parents' home for the summer. One day after she flew in from Hawaii and discovered the closed road, she had made a visit to the supervisor at his home. She knew her family name still meant something in Port Blake.

On any summer day when his grandparents' many offspring gathered at the house, the kids and teenagers hear a call they think only they can hear. Wherever they are, they stop and break away from games of freeze-tag and statues. Reaching a throng, they run to the closer bridge. Then they divide, run to opposite sides, hug the rails and shout as a car squeezes past their waving arms. But if the old timbers shake, a train is coming. The kids line up on the side facing the New York Central line. Down the river, beyond a sharp bend, a narrow tunnel of space through the woods. Rectangles in rust-dull shades, speeding black and green with names like Lackawana, Bethlehem, Erie, Youngstown. The children wait for a wave from the man riding the caboose, cheer if they get it, boo if the train dies away with no greeting. Who's riding the caboose that day? they would demand, marching back to the house. Uncle Guy would always know.

He threw his cigarette into the weeds and turned back. Over the first bridge, up the road a quarter-mile, into the driveway. Toss the cigarette pack in his father's car, remove the lighter from his shirt pocket. The old house sat far back from the road, acres of green on three sides, sea of grass sweeping up a low hill, breaking against the stolid yellow walls. Beyond it, hiding a wire fence made by the railroad, the line of a high boxhedge, parallel with the tracks. He glanced where the chicken house had stood, crossed the lawn, through the kitchen door. You expect places from your childhood to seem smaller than you remember, but even when he was a boy the hammered tin kitchen ceiling seemed too close. He ducked his head as he crossed the rooms, resisting the Alice in Wonderland sensation. The others were gathered on the porch. No drinks or ashtrays or plates of food scattered about. Only his two aunts, his father, and his Uncle Ralph, sharing the glider with his second wife. Port Blake's annual Erie Canal Days had just ended. His aunts had stories to tell.

"Here you are," his Aunt Ada said, smiling at him as he paused in the doorway. "Looking at the creek? It's so low this year. Wish it looked better for your first time back in years. What a draught we're having, all over the state."

"Knee-high by the Fourth of July, that's what the sweet corn should be." His Uncle Ralph nodding, a broad smile with large, straight teeth. A navy blue knit

shirt open at the throat, the V of a clean white T-shirt. Blue polyester trousers, white socks, black shoes. “Stopped to look at old man Doane’s fields today, my way over here. Barely a foot high. Won’t be worth buying.”

“When did they close off the road just past the mill bridge?” He crossed the empty spaces among them, pulled a ladderback chair closer to the group.

Around him the screens rose twelve feet high, clamped securely in white frames freshly painted. A gaggle of locals maintained the house, plumbers, electricians, jacks-of-all-trades. Lucille deployed them from Hawaii, faxed orders to the Port Blake post office, countermanded them with express mail. “Town Council condemned it last year,” she said. “Easiest thing to do was close the road at that end. Funny how everyone always thought it was our bridge that would fall down, but it keeps holding together. The other bridge certainly seemed sturdier, being metal and all, but I guess the grid work is all corroded. You didn’t walk on it, did you? They should have blocked it off this side, too.” Lucille, past seventy, but the family’s baby. Shorts and sandals, her white legs bare, knees level with her chin as she perched on the foot of a chaise lounge. The only woman among his father’s five sisters to make a career. When his grandparents’ home had flourished, she would swoop in without warning, surprise them with slide shows of Spain, Leningrad, Nepal. Now she endured a digesive system turned into mush by radium treatments for cancer. But never a word of sickness from her, no fears of death.

His father remarked about the metal foundry in Weedsport that had made the bridge floor. The owner had died the summer before, just past his one-hundredth birthday. “Dick Mallet his name was. He came out here sometimes, Sundays, in the old days, with his wife. Five kids. Dad worked at that foundry for a few years.”

“Six kids,” Ada corrected, “but one died last year.” Which one? How did it happen? His elders talked, spinning sparse webs of family friends aged or dead, of relatives whose names had floated through his youth detached from faces and bodies. But one name, Jeanette Mallet, halted the flow of associations. Long dead, but Ralph had almost married her, fresh out of high school. Lucille and Ada looked away from Leslie, Ralph’s second wife, almost the same age as Ralph’s oldest daughter. The only sibling ever divorced, Ralph had started a second family with her, fathered three more children a generation younger than his first six.

“But doesn’t it bother you to drive the long way around to get to Port Blake?” He didn’t care about the answer, only wanted to draw attention from Ralph. No one ever referred to Ralph’s divorce, not even by using Ralph and “marriage” in the same sentence. Not even when they talked about Ralph’s first batch of children. He wondered if the six cousins he hadn’t seen in years felt any anger over having their mother’s memory expunged by their father’s people.

“Only adds a few miles,” Lucille answered. “And the road’d gotten so rutted past the mill bridge that most everybody went the long way even before they closed the bridge. Now it’s like having a private road, just so long as Sam Tyler keeps the county plowing it all winter.”

“But the road seems so narrow now. The trees are grown right to the edge of the pavement. It’s like a jungle around the mill.” But Lucille and Ralph only shook their heads. His father sighed.

Ada smoothed over the crease. “Lucille’s been to Tokyo just like you. You’re the only one, I swear, to take after her, running all around the world. Everyone else has stuck to upstate like glue.” Three of her siblings dead, but Ada, the eldest, still tolerant, kind. A swarm of locusts, Kapozi sarcoma clawed at her legs from

ankles to knees. Rust-brown, dust-dry patches aching to be peeled away. Her nylon stockings, their clash against her ravaged skin, made the blight seem even more painful. Did she wear them because they kept the flesh from spilling apart? He swallowed hard, Ada's cancer shouting at him as loudly as Lucille's kept its silence. He thought of a character in a Williams play who said she couldn't keep her finger off a sore. He thought of Ada alone at night, nursing her carnivorous plague. He thought of flesh pulling in bloody strands from bone. A shudder caught him, the August air gone cold.

On most Sundays in the old days, Ada would ride to the country home with him, his father, and his sisters. His father behind oversized steering wheels of smooth, hard plastic with finger grooves. The perfect family riding together through years of Buicks and Chevrolets, except the woman sitting in front was Ada, his aunt, not his mother. His father's black hair, Ada's neat blonde upsweep, opposite ends of bench seats, back when only sports cars for teenagers had bucket seats. When they drive home, she sits in the back, his small body, then Nance's, sliding upon her, heads burrowed into her shoulders and lap. Ginnie far away at the end of the long seat, already separate, slumping against the hard door in the dark. For thirty miles, he would grope through waking dreams, begin counting bars of light rolling over the hump in the floor and up the back of the front seat. Fifty bars, sometimes a hundred, before they finally reach the streetlights of Skaneatles. When he left home for college, his connection to Ada all but died. He glanced at her legs again, felt a pang for all the missing years. But the drive to abandon his father's family had overwhelmed him slowly, as it had his two sisters before him. The night that Ginnie told everyone in the house to go to hell, the series of ruptures began. Decades passed before his sisters, halting, unsure, began their separate paths back.

"Tell us about living in Tokyo, Eddie. We're all so glad you got out of . . . where was it? Kuwait? Yes, it sounded so dangerous. And I love your postcards from Japan."

"And that gorgeous flowered silk kimono." Lucille strident, hard-lipped. "Most beautiful thing Ada's ever owned, that's for sure."

"Kimono?" Ralph laughed, nudging his wife. "On Ada?"

"I don't remember getting too old for something new, Ralph. And I've had a decent dress or two in my day, Lucille." Ada huffed, but her tone was playful. Trying to straighten up in her chair, she pushed back against her hunch. "I love my kimono. I leave it hanging out so I can look at it."

He watched Ada's face. The bright daylight picked out the black flecks in her hazel eyes. When she was younger, the kids would order her to show them those spots, make her bend over or pick them up for a better view. She would laugh, remove her glasses, open her eyes so wide the irises were surrounded by white, tell them all that only she and Siamese cats had eyes with tiny tongues of flame.

"So tell us, what's it like, Tokyo?" she asked again.

Describe Tokyo? In a house on a road closed off because metal bridges rot? Describe Tokyo on the porch of his grandparents' house? But he found topics. Getting immobilized by the crush of bodies in subway cars. Theaters where everyone drinks beer and chain-smokes. But only the apples that cost ten dollars each struck chords in his audience. "Ten of *our* dollars?" Ada asked. Ralph whistled. Lucille, worldly, nodded.

But the sharpness in Ada's face dulled in the noon sunlight, her question left unanswered. Ralph turned from his wife, stared at the floor. Even Lucille's hard

edges caught the blur of sudden vagueness. Howard, his father, began resetting his watch. Only Ralph's wife continued talking, her head bent close to Ralph's ear. He watched them each in turn, wondering what they heard that he missed. Then he remembered.

Their approach always a thrum through the floorboards, a grumbling glissando. Silver and black cylinders, the passenger trains spring upon the house like jungle cats. Pearl-strung freight trains crash into the mind with rattling teacups, tilting photographs. When the house was filled with families, children faces' pressed against all the windows when trains passed, watching closely. Later he would whisper with his cousins about how they could jump on a train someday, real hobos, ride it far away from their parents. But only he would follow the trains' disappearing trails.

Once he had turned from a window to see what the adults did while the house shook. His grandparents in their matched wing chairs separated by a table with the lamp Lucille brought from Germany. Other adults scattered about, some seated, others standing. Ada in the archway between two rooms, long before osteoporosis turned her into a hunchback. Lucille and Ralph at the dining room table, papers spread before them. Uncle Guy in the antique rocking chair, the room's terror and pride because hands could get trapped between the wooden base and rocker. Still ungreyed, Guy's thick hair swept up in a brown wave, his eyes bright blue. Next to him, the tall large-hipped woman he would never marry. What was her name? Years after Guy's death, he had asked Ada why Guy remained a bachelor. For a moment, he thought she might tell him what he suspected. Her benign smile faded, her bright eyes darkened. But then he felt the distant roaring through his chair, an envoy to silence. Her answer died with the oncoming train.

Passing trains delete moments, disrupt connections. For him, for everyone on the screened porch in the buried house at the edge of drapery lawns, a space of green memory, void of time-chased crowds from long ago. Rumbling boxcars swayed, disconnected from the family's limping survivors by a tall hedge and leaning picket fence. From where he sat, he saw only their roofs, but slowly, straining to catch the black borders separating cars, one day he began counting. And never stopped. Had his compulsion begun with train cars? The entire time he was in Tokyo, he never discovered a Japanese word that translated "phobia." Stopping on sidewalks to scan skyscrapers top to bottom, counting the floors. Halting mid-step to count the steps of an escalator as they sank into the floor. Something about Tokyo had made the drive stronger. One day he counted all the tiles on the wall of a public restroom before he could stop.

In his teens, watching from the window in the upstairs hall, he had counted to the fifteenth car when someone grabbed his arm, jerked him into Uncle Guy's bedroom. That summer, she came with his cousin Nina, one of Ralph's girls, to his grandparents' home. His sisters would go off with her and Nina, a crowd of younger girls trailing them down to the bridge. No boys wanted. She hit the door shut with her hip, pushed him down on Guy's bed. As she climbed him, before her mouth covered his, Guy's narrow, well-cleaned room came at him in angles and dashes. A crucifix above the bed, a Big Ben alarm clock on the table. Three photographs. Guy with Ralph and Howard, three brothers at war. Army fatigues and cloth caps, a snub-nosed fighter plane behind them. Next to that, in a thick wooden frame on the high-topped dresser, Guy's lady friend in a flowered sundress, waving. On the wall above, where one would expect a mirror, Guy's parents when they were young.

When she slipped her hand beneath the waistband of his trousers, he rolled over, pushed her down. She laughed up at him, the sound swallowed by the roaring train, her hand still in his pants. He pulled her sweater up, reached for the top buttons on a white blouse with a purple school insignia. As his hand slid over the texture of her bra, she poked her hand through his shorts. Caught in her hard grip, he rolled to one side. Gasping in the fumbling pressure of her hand, he saw another photograph, almost hidden on the lowest shelf of a table in the narrow space between the bed and the wall. A man sitting cross-legged, shoulders straight and square. One hand down by heavy boot soles, the other raised to his head in a two-fingered salute.

Wait he tried to tell the girl. But the train fractured words in his mouth. He felt her squeeze again before he thrust himself away. For a moment, they lay facing each other, his outstretched arms holding her back. Panting, her eyes mocking him, the train's hard shudders seeped into the walls and floors, fading. Squirming away from her, he reached for the picture. Blond curls flying in a wind beneath a G.I. cap. Dog-tags hanging against a bare lanky chest, smooth and hairless. A smile so honest a cheap war-time camera froze it forever. In one corner, letters half-covered by the black matting, an inscription. "See you soon, pal. Milan, July 1949. Timmy."

"We didn't get here until after dark because of the trouble I had renting the car at the airport." The train gone, Lucille's sharp voice cut through his thoughts. "And what do we find but the outside floodlight isn't on. So up the sidewalk we go across the lawn. I always used to keep a penlight on my keychain, need to get a new one. That sidewalk is *so* long in the pitch dark. And that big crack near the apple tree. Got to get that mason back here to feather over those ridges. I'm carrying both our suitcases in one hand, dragging Ada behind me with the other, trying not to hit the crack." Her voice dropped, although Ada was in the kitchen, fixing lunch. "She just can't walk that far anymore, you know. Not between the cancer and having her spine bent over almost double. She swears that if it gets any worse she'll be staring at the ground the rest of her life. People will have to lie flat on the ground to talk to her face-to-face."

"Aunt Ada's cancer—" He spoke quickly, but his father ended it. What happened to the big safety light? he wanted to know. Those mercury lamps never burn out. Important to have that working, the house empty most of the year and all. It was working okay one night not more than a week ago, Ralph assured them. Drove by to check on the place after a potluck at the fire hall. Ralph's wife nodded. She clearly recalled the light burning that night, same as always.

Opening the door, peering into the hall, sinners quick-stepping down the hallway in opposite directions. After the roll on his uncle's bed, he sat on the floor next to Uncle Guy in the rocker. Stealing glances downward, he thought something had changed between his legs, that some trace remained visible to others. Was she upstairs in the big corner bedroom, laughing with his girl cousins? His sisters? Waiting through the silence of two more trains, listening to the adult talk, bored with Mitch Miller on television. But his uncle suddenly seemed new, different. The youngest except Lucille, the closest of all the siblings to their parents, best friend to all his nieces and nephews. But for Ed, Guy changed that night. *As if that hand on my penis woke me up to all the oddness*, he thought. Before that day, the facts of Guy's life seemed ordinary. The boy-like bachelor with a spartan bedroom in his parents' home. Coming home at night with his father from the railroad. The twin metal lunchboxes sitting by the cookie jar every night until his father died. Then

Guy's lunchbox sat alone until long after his mother was also dead, until Guy had cancer and stopped working. But after that girl had pulled him onto Guy's bed that day, after he saw the photograph of handsome blond Timmy, Ed realized that being unmarried was never normal for a man beyond a certain age. In his grandparents' house, Guy's status went unremarked, ignored through some coded silence. At that time, Guy was only a few years older than Ed was now.

On the screened-in porch, in the twilight of life for his father's family, he remembered Guy's face that night. The girl and Timmy's picture ended the gliding summers of simple, friendly Guy. And Guy's courtship with the cheerful woman became strange, occluded. She wore knee-length dresses with large flowers, chased children all around the lawns, white slip flying. The only adult woman who would let the kids pull her into sweaty outdoor games. She had been there one day years before he found Guy's picture of Timmy, the day that Ginnie, his oldest sister, told aunts, uncles, grandparents to go to hell. Staring through a window into the dark, the reflection of her face barred by a night train's speeding yellow lights, she said *Go to hell* into the glass. But she intended it for everyone in the house. Clumped on the loveseat in the downstairs parlor, he saw her hard-fixed jaw, her narrow lips. He drew his knees to his chest, wrapped his arms around them. *Don't do it Ginnie*, he said, shaking with cold sweat, banging his head against the carved wood overarching the loveseat's heart-shaped back. In the dining room, across the kitchen, out to the lawns, tables waiting to have their heavy flannel cloths removed, the whole world of his father's family moved beyond his sight, behind his sister's back, that summer night. It might have been any day in the country. But it was his first at Port Blake after his mother died. His family's first visit after five weeks of waking paralyzed into long, silent days.

The welcome at his grandparents' house that day, even from Guy, held him and Ginnie and Nance at bay, blocked them from pestering the adults in their usual way. Just a few words drove them outside, set them eating at the children's table, pushed them down to the bridge, into games, away from adults. His father was expected to behave like an adult, to join his siblings and parents in forgetting about the dead woman. But the children were too young. Only Guy's friend sought them out that day. In a lemon yellow dress, she plucked them away from the other children, herded them into her big convertible, drove them to town for milkshakes. On a dirt road, they stopped to watch a herd of pigs in a field. Ed sat with the woman in the front, listening to her rapid chatter. In the back, Ginnie and Nance sat like bookends. When the woman turned—*Is your favorite pig here, Ginnie? The black and white one with only one ear?*—Ginnie looked at the big red cup in her hand. Abruptly, raising her eyes to the woman in the sundress, she flung her milkshake over the door. He watched it sail between two strands of barbed wire. The plastic cup burst, the strawberry liquid making a splat in the muddy grass. Slowly, the woman turned to face the windshield, started the car, her smile tightening into a hard crease. As they pulled away from the field, the pigs' tiny feet fought for space around the pink circle, their sleek, hard barrels rolling against each other, sides heaving.

Dusk fell as they returned, the house a lighted island on its dark hill. Ginnie marched ahead, left him and Nance to dawdle up the sidewalk with Guy's girlfriend. When Ed came through the kitchen door, he saw Ginnie walk straight through the house. His mouth went dry as he followed, the taste of chocolate slick on his lips. Suddenly sick, he thought of sharp pig tongues picking milkshake drops from manure-mixed mud. For a moment, Ginnie stood alone in the center of the

living room, turning in place, searching. He saw Ginnie look first at Lucille, then at Ada. His grandmother's pale wrinkled face, white under the German lamp's harsh glare, concerned. She began to rise, but then his grandfather's baritone voice rang through the room. *The bay windows on the new Penn Central cabooses are stupid, just plain stupid. A rock gets thrown up from the rails and those windows will be smashed sure as jack-squat.* Ralph and Guy laughed, nodded their head. Ada, her eyes still fixed on Ginnie, a quick glance at her mother, slowly sat down again, as though the weight of her father's voice pushed her down. Ed's father looked once at Ginnie, still a lonely figure in the room's center, stranded by the grown-up talk of men, the women's silence. Then his father turned away from Ginnie, joined his brothers and father, laughing.

He bolted through the living room, into the short hall leading to the parlor. Looking back once, he saw Ginnie jabbing her fists at Ada, his aunt trying to catch hold of the girl's thin wrists, his grandmother rising, clutching the girl from behind. Whatever Ginnie shouted, it included *My mother, my mother. Why don't you ask where she is?* A shrill train whistle startled the people filling the room's many chairs and couches. As the room began roaring, heads turned down, away from each other, from Ginnie punching at Ada. In the darkened parlor, he threw himself onto the loveseat, wishing the noise would never stop, that the whistle would shriek so long no one would remember what Ginnie had said. Then she appeared in the hall connecting the two rooms. Red-faced, breathless, she put her hands against the window frame and shook it, shouting. Far away, at the end of a tunnel, Ada watched, standing by her chair. For a moment, he saw her face askew, saw her gangly body twist in indecision. Then she sat down again, whispered to her mother. *Go to hell*, Ginnie yelled. *Go to hell, go to hell.*

Almost thirty years later, his father remarried and widowed again, five years since his second wife died. How often had he heard anyone in his father's family mention his mother since the night that Ginnie made her break? He knew now that Ginnie escaped the family that night, even though the familial trips continued for years until the day she was old enough to tell her father *No, I won't go there anymore.* Before his grandparents died, he never heard his mother's name from them again, nor from Lucille or Ralph. Perhaps a few times from Ada, in the days of drowsy car rides. Fewer still from his father, only when something happened that made the reference unavoidable. His stepmother, Phyllis, he suddenly realized, probably had spoken his mother's name before she died more often than his father ever did. He tried to remember what finally made Ginnie stop shouting at the train that night. No adult, he felt sure, came to take her from the window. Safe in a train's vacuum, they would leave her alone, let her yell out her fury as long as she wanted. Or let it consume her. Certainly he did not go to help her. Too young to feel compassion, too cowardly. Or maybe he already was trained against it. While he hid in the parlor, hating her for tearing the family's seamlessness, Ginnie shook the window, hollered alone into the dark until she was spent.

"Well, better see how Ada's getting around in the kitchen." Lucille hopped up, stood poised, rocking from heel to toe. "Hope she hasn't fallen over."

"Must be hard for her to get up and down the stairs to her apartment," Ed's father said. Everyone nodded. "But she still has a good sense of humor. Same as she always has."

"Mary Ann Brighton died in Tennessee last week," Ralph spoke up. "The Port Blake paper ran an obituary. Good picture of her. Always kept herself up right."

Surprised, his father shook his head slowly. But Lucille knew, gave a quick nod. “Her sister Loretta mailed me a copy of the obit from the Tennessee paper. Came the day before I left Hawaii. Have to get it laminated when I get home.”

“What killed her?” Ralph’s wife asked. “The Port Blake paper didn’t say.”

“Cancer.” Lucille sighed, looked down at her sandaled feet.

“Mary Ann Brighton?” He looked at their faces, waiting for a clue, but Lucille, Ralph, and his father only stared at him. For the first time that day, he had gained their full attention. “Who was she?” he asked, feeling stupid.

“Who was she?” His father’s disapproving tone. “Your Uncle Guy’s lady friend, of course, until she moved south to live with her mother. You remember her. Always drove a convertible. Wore long scarves and sunglasses when she had the top down. You and Ginnie and Nance were all crazy about her. All the kids were. But you especially, as I remember.”

He nodded, her name a shock as sharp as seeing a friend lost for years. He remembered shouting *Mary Ann!* in running games, climbing onto her lap in the big car, batting at the flying ends of the scarf wrapped around her hair until she laughed.

“And she was your mother’s best friend, too.” Lucille suddenly sat down again as she spoke. She put a hand to her lower stomach, wincing.

“Really?” The hum of insects beyond the screens seemed to deepen. He felt a swell in his chest. “You mean . . .?” His inadequacy like a deep note suspended in the air. “You mean my mother . . . Evelyn?” Had he ever spoken her name before them? The last time he had referred to her in his grandparents’ house, it would have been with “mom” or “mommy.” A pause for their reaction, then, less unsure, “Are you talking about my real mother, I mean. Not Phyllis. Evelyn.”

Lucille nodded once, fist pushed against her stomach. Swallowed a pant, spoke quickly. “Of course I mean Evelyn. Your stepmother never met Mary Ann, not that I know of. Mary Ann was Evelyn’s maid of honor when she married your father. Everybody thought she and Guy would be the next ones to the altar. Your mother and her were the prettiest bride and maid of honor Port Blake ever saw. Mary Ann’s dress was seafoam blue, exact same shade as her eyes. They went to New York City, finally, for the wedding gown. And the bridesmaids’ dresses, I think. Couldn’t find anything they liked in Syracuse or Rochester. Both of them fussy, you know. Fastidious, maybe I should say. Mrs. Vance, your mother’s mother, raised Evelyn to have standards. They had money before the Depression, you know. But not just that. A long place—a long position, back a long ways. Then she married your mother’s father and he *made* a great deal of money during the Depression. That was when the big house in New York City came in. Mrs. Vance sailed through everything like a great ship. She started her own business, manufactured something, made her own fortune. But when she heard what the doctors said about Evelyn, from that very first second, she changed. Never went back to her old self.”

He looked sideways at his father, found him winding his watch, the gold one that the railroad gave to Guy when he quit for good, hit by cancer. He looked up. “Gloves,” he said. “She manufactured expensive gloves.”

“Check on that ham,” Lucille muttered, standing again, “not that I can eat any. But Hawaii’s a good place to be a vegetarian. *And* lactose- *and* gluten-intolerant, I guess.” She squared her shoulders, pulled her fist from her stomach. “Ada,” her jaw jutting out, “you upright in that kitchen or crawling around on the

linoleum on your hands and knees?" Ralph and his wife laughed. His father still adjusting his watch.

From far back in the kitchen, Ada's voice. "I am walking in my own accustomed manner, Lucille, thank you for your concern. Could use some help with this food. We don't all live on boiled greens and corn mush, you know."

"Whatever happened with Mary Ann and Uncle Guy, anyway?" he asked. Guy and Mary Ann seemed trivial, a substitute for the real issue, but how could he acknowledge the shock of Lucille's sudden revelations? She used his mother's name as if no one had pretended to forget it for thirty years.

"Nothing to tell of," Lucille answered. "Things just don't work out sometimes. Guy never said anything was wrong. Just told us one day Mary Ann was moving to Tennessee. But they stayed friends. She flew up here three or four times when he was near the end. Drove him to Buffalo once for his treatment, if I remember correct. Maybe she met Phyllis one of those times, come to think of it. You remember, Howard?"

But his father only shook his head, looked down at the grey painted boards, expression blank.

"And what about that friend of Guy's from the war? The man named Timmy? Wasn't he here a few times when I was a kid? At Sunday family picnics?" Doubtful of how convincing he sounded, he kept his eyes on Lucille, afraid his father would see the lie.

"'Timmy?' What 'Timmy?'" The family's historian, Lucille's voice was sharp.

"Five-twelve is coming. Early today." His father's voice like a hammer thrown on the floor.

"You're a clock, Howard." Ralph slapped his knee. "Almost as good as Guy. Only Guy knew the number of cars, too, on darn near every train. And the exact number of ties between every crossing point. Great for counting things, Guy was."

"For counting? You mean he . . . ?" Ed paused, thinking of a compulsion revisiting a family.

"Tim was just Guy's buddy in the war, Ed." His father ignored Ralph's prattle. "Died on a ship from Italy to France, something wrong with his stomach. Guess you're still a good one for asking questions, Ed."

With the first note of a long shrill whistle far down the tracks, Ada appeared in the doorway. Lucille turned her head toward the sound, source still unseen, then sat down again. Under his father's glare, he felt his face redden. He twisted in his seat, caught by Ada's lurching maneuvers. One hand on a chair inside the living room, with the other she gripped the knob of the open door. Arms outstretched, she listed, a frigate taking bearing on a high rolling peak. One black-red leg inched toward the step down to the porch. She moved one hand forward, swayed, then groped behind her again for the chair. When the porch floor began to shake, Ed stood up, made to step forward. But Ada laughed, waved a gnarled hand at him. Like a metal cap wrenched from a soda bottle, she twisted her head up so she could look at him directly. She pulled one hand free again, lowered one foot over the step. Her flat slipper landed with an urgent firmness on the bare boards. Grounded, she brought her other leg over, then straightened, balancing with her arms. Looks of admiration from Ralph and his wife. A straight-lipped smile from Lucille. Ada regarded them. Then an extravagant wave with one arm, a vaudeville feint. She tilted her head forward, bent her knees. She bowed, wavering near the door, a smile on her face like it would have been on any day long ago. The locomotive burst upon the house, shaking the hedge into green commotion,

blasting white flowers from branches. Screens hummed like fine tuning forks in their white frames. Crossing the porch in two long strides, he put his arms around Ada’s stunted back, bent over to bring his face close to hers. Carefully, he eased her onto the glider’s soft cushion, next to Ralph. He stood up, his long erect body awkward so near her. But he stayed beside her all through the train’s interval, apposite the dark rail lines beyond the edge of his family’s land.